

GUARDIAN AND LOVER

BY MRS. ALEXANDER FRASER



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BY

MRS ALEXANDER FRASER,

AUTHOR OF 'A FATAL PASSION,' 'A PROFESSIONAL BEAUTY,'
'A PEERESS OF 1882,' ETC., ETC.

'I never felt the kiss of love,
Nor maiden's hand in mine.
Tennyson.

A New Edition.

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GUARDIAN AND LOVER.



CHAPTER I.

DRIFTING CLOUDS.

‘If we can have any pleasing dreams, it is, as the French say, *tant gagné*, so much added to the pleasure of life.’—*Franklin*.



PEARL!’

The voice is exceedingly low and gentle, and sweet as silver chimes, yet it startles me. I am lying on a broad window-sill, in an attitude that is physically pleasant, although it may be personally inelegant, plunged in day-dreams, fantastical, absurd, but nevertheless beautiful. Little more than the whites of my eyes are visible as I stare up intently at the white clouds drifting along the clear sky like bits of carded wool, or as though ‘an angel in his upward flight had left his mantle floating’ in the blue ether.

One cloud has especially attracted my notice. It puts me strangely in mind of myself. It is a small and insignificant cloud, but its apparent pursuit of a bigger one is hot and hurried.

I stop for a moment in my study to wonder to myself whether it is the most sensible thing in the world for a girl arrived at the mature age of twenty years to allow herself to be interested, engrossed, I might say, in such trivialities as

drifting clouds. Surely I might as lief go and play at blowing soap-bubbles! but in spite of dire misgiving as to the quantum of wisdom I possess, I keep on pertinaciously looking at the particular cloud I have marked out as a sort of allegory of myself in the dim future.

‘Shall I?’—I soliloquise quite solemnly, while I pull myself up with an energetic jerk from the indolent posture I have been indulging in, and sit bolt upright and square on the hard sill, with my feet tucked up under me, after the fashion of an oriental Begum, in the hope of deluding myself that the sill is cushioned,—‘Shall I, like that cloud, ever find myself in hot and hurried pursuit of a soul infinitely bigger than my own, and, reaching it, lose my weakness and insignificance in its nobility and strength?’

At this identical moment the little cloud nears the big one, and in the far distance they commingle.

I feel my face all flushed and aglow while my heart beats fast at the augury, when papa calls out to me,—

‘Pearl!’

In an instant I am bending over him as he lies on the sofa.

Presently he opens his eyes; large, blue languid eyes, with heavy white lids, like deep dark violets crushed in a weight of snow.

‘What is my little one doing to amuse herself?’ he questions.

‘Watching the drifting clouds,’ I answer, half ashamed of confessing to my excessively puerile occupation, and fearful of evoking a smile at my childish folly; but papa does not give even the ghost of a smile—he only looks, if possible, sadder than before, as I speak.

‘Drifting! drifting! like all else in this world,’ he murmurs, almost inaudibly, between his pale lips.

I stoop down on pretence of kissing them, but in reality I want to hear more plainly what he says.

‘I am so tired and drowsy to-day! It is the sultry weather,’ he adds, wearily reclosing his eyes, while I steal away on tiptoe, back to my old seat, and look sorrowfully and fixedly across the room at his face.

What a superb face it is! Perfect as a Greek god’s.

Papa is my ideal of Glaucus, except that the lines round

his mouth are firmer than those that the hero of Pompeii possessed, I fancy, and there is not much resemblance in the old brown coat, which my fingers have so often deftly patched up and mended, so as to leave no outward and visible sign of the dire emptiness of our coffers, to the exquisite purple and fine linen with which Glaucus was adorned.

There are dark shadows creeping over papa's brow now and then, even while half asleep, that seem to cast a gloom right across to where I sit ; but I try very hard, with the elastic buoyancy of youth, to shake them off me as they fall. The straight and chiselled features are wan and thin, and so sharply defined against the red wall, that my eyes fill and my heart sinks as I gaze, but the face has been wan and thin so long that hope does not desert me now, and I believe I was born with a sanguine temperament.

For five years our home has been in this rambling, old-fashioned house, that has been dignified for a couple of centuries by the loud-sounding title of Château La Roche. It is undeniably of the mongrel species. The Belgian architects evidently had no leaning towards the Corinthian or the Doric in the dark ages, and the château resulted in a cross between an old broken-down barn and a modern almshouse. Several portions of the building show marks of dilapidation, and on one side are masses of ivy, lichens, and mosses, that thrive and flourish luxuriantly, fostered by damp. Half the rooms are shut up, for the whole and sole benefit, apparently, of the mice. The La Roche mice, quadrupeds whose extraordinary obesity is known for leagues and leagues around, and whose lungs and muscular powers are undoubted, judging by the high galas they keep, and the raids they carry on upon wall and wainscot.

Heaps of long and dreary corridors intersect the house, where the peasant folk affirm that ghosts, white and fearful, keep their trysts at nightfall, and where Boreas whistles and sighs, while rheumatism reigns supreme.

There are only four rooms in use, and they are of the most unpretending character. The furniture is scant and moth-eaten, and luxury does not sit at our board, for my father, Philip Cathcart, albeit a scion of the rich Cathcarts of Warwickshire, is decidedly poor ; his bank-book is a myth, and his

catalogue of debts was long, as long as my arm (and for a slip of a girl my arm is very long, giving abundant promise of the substantial position I may yet attain to in this world), but economy, rigid economy, nay, even more, a painful penuriousness and patient plodding, has succeeded in wiping out a score of them.

We have no glitter of gew-gaws, no hideous but priceless monstrosities in rarest china and virtù, the small but unmistakable evidences of a well-filled purse; but we are wealthy in books, for papa is a bookworm, his *fidi Achatæ* are Plato and Plutarch, and his familiar friends all the 'ologies.' And we have heaps of the freshest glowing blossoms brimming over the dear old ugly bowls of common blue Dutch ware. Just at this moment the August sun is slanting his fervid beams edgewise into the southern room, beautifying and gilding up with his red glory all the musty, fusty old folios, just as the gas glare lights up the haggard, worn faces of play-actors.

With the soft radiance of sunlight the whole place wears a holiday aspect. Papa has fallen into a light sleep, and turning away from my mournful survey of his features, I lean out of the window, while Phœbus, riding rampant through the sky above, kisses my cheeks into brown berries, and implants mementoes of his caresses in great yellow freckles that do not add materially to improve the summit of my indisputably insignificant nose and the olive of my decided chin.

But I am philosophically indifferent. In the frame of mind I am in, I infinitely prefer enjoyment to being ever so beautiful, and so I revel freely and heartily in the warmth of the deep yellow sunbeams, with the sleeves of my bodice tucked up right to my elbows like a dairymaid, leaving my dusky arms bare, and my ebon curls flying like pennons at a masthead in the western breeze, that whispers sweet soft nothings into my ear, and calls up vivid pink to my cheek by the 'wooing o' it.'

Across the oriel window bunches of roses trail heavily. Some are red as blood, some golden hued, some white as milk. Parting them gently, I look out. The house stands on a slight eminence, and slopes southwards, and from it one can see right past other houses and gardens down to what appears in the sunshine and moonlight just like a

little narrow line. It is the prettiest of rivers the Meuse, quivering and wriggling like a gigantic silvery worm between the verdant Belgian banks. Away to the far right gleam up, through a lengthy reach of trees, the white maisonettes of the Liegeois manufacturers ; and to the left lies an ancient *cimetière*, enclosed by a dilapidated low stone wall, with its quaint-shaped tablets and tombs crowned with crosses and angels, and ornamented by wreaths of yellow immortelles.

My eyes rest dreamily upon the trees in our garden, laden with ripe, rich peaches, and follow the course of the gorgeous butterflies over the beds of homely flowers. The drooping clusters of the barberry shine like gold among the dark green leaves ; the rhododenron burns like a blood-red flame among the paler blossoms ? the scent of briony and clove pinks is wafted towards me ; the drowsy hum of the great brown bees, as they feast greedily off the luscious heads of the foxglove, sounds on my ear ; and blue dragonflies, with filmy wings, dart backwards and forwards, and gleam up like jewels against our old grey walls. The scene and the air is full of a pure voluptuousness, that appeals to my senses and gives me such keen enjoyment that I feel I could sit on this hard sill for ever !

I am as ignorant of life as a babe unborn. All the sin and the misery that I have heard forms three parts of it, are to me but misty, intangible things, that I have no desire to fathom or realise. It is quite enough pleasure to me to live, to revel in light and fragrance and health. I remember well the words, 'Man is born to sorrow as the sparks fly upwards ;' but I am sceptical as to that cheerful aphorism being applicable to woman, in the happy, contented mood I am in. Later, who knows ? I may be forced to resort to the 'maddening draughts of Hippocrene,' of which poets tell, to keep up my belief that it is a fair world and a pleasant one. Now great healthy quaffs of fresh air, balmy with the fragrant breath of summer, are sufficiently strong to stimulate my capabilities to enjoy.

CHAPTER II.

MY FIRST SHADOW.

‘For marriage is a matter of more worth
 Than to be dealt in by attorneyship ;
 For what is wedlock forced but a hell,
 An age of discord and continual strife ?’
Shakepeare.

A BUNCH of mignonette strikes my bare arm, and rouses me out of my pleasant day-dream. I am not frightened in the least, for I know that poor old La Roche holds out no sort of temptation to either bandit or burglar, and that the only intruder on the square circumscribed morsel of turf that we designate a courtyard, because it is hemmed in by bricks, must be Susanne, a dear, ruddy-visaged, rough Flamande, soyer, abigail, and boots, a *tria juncta in uno*, incongruous, but invaluable to us—or else Bertrand de Volnay. Moreover, I am aware that, with the sole exception of the individual in question, there is no one of the *genus homo* in all Belgium who would venture to pelt me familiarly with flower-sprigs. The action creates neither ire nor indignation in my breast—I simply smile, and say quietly,—

‘Here is Bertrand, papa.’

Papa halfuncloses his eyes, and murmurs languidly, ‘Come in ;’ and Bertrand evidently requires no further pressing, for he vaults over the sill and places himself in as close proximity as is possible to me. The sill is not very wide, and having an antipathy to being over-crowded, I squeeze myself into the very farthest corner of it ; and Bertram notices the movement, for he flushes up to the roots of his hair ; and the effulgence of the smile he wore on entering ends in a purse of his full lips that does not become him, while he sits silent as a block of wood and as uninteresting.

He is a Belgian, the only son of an excessively wealthy and retired manufacturer of fire-arms at Liège. The De Volnays are, in fact, enormous landholders round about here, but bourgeois to the very core, and with doubtful right to the aristocratic ‘De’ prefixed to their name.

La Roche belongs to them, and it was in the position of tenants that our acquaintance began five years ago, up to which time papa and I, a couple of waifs, led a Bohemian existence in the different continental cities—ever since my mother died, and left me, a troublesome, toddling child of twelve months, without her care and love.

I was fifteen and Bertrand seventeen, when he first brought me fruit and flowers from the richly filled hot-houses on the paternal estate, on the pretence that papa's health required such luxuries and delicacies; and I have accepted them thankfully, and tried to be grateful; but I begin to think gratitude is not one of my strong points. I look at Bertrand now as he sits beside me, with the light streaming through the high window full upon his face, and I wonder to myself whether he is what folk call 'handsome.'

I like fair men. I have taken my standard of beauty from papa, whose hair gleams up like gold, and whose descent is decidedly true Saxon. Saxon is inscribed legibly on his clear fair tints, on his thoroughbred nose, and on his hands, that are as white and soft as a woman's.

Bertrand's crisp black hair curls over his brow; his eyes are black as sloes, and his complexion swarthy as that of a Creole. An excellent Spanish matador or an Italian bravo he would make; but his good looks touch me as lightly as the shrivelled little leaf that has just fluttered down from a rose branch on my head.

Papa lies quietly on his sofa, watching Bertrand covertly, and with a curious half smile on his lips. Presently he says,—

'What ails you, Bertrand?'

'What ails me?' is the reply, given jerkily, and accompanied by a curt laugh, that bears discord in its sound, and grates on my sensitive ear. 'Why, what should ail me?'

The hot blood mounts up quickly in his dark face, and suddenly, with a very rapid gesture, he seizes the bunch of mignonette that lies in my lap unnoticed, and hurls it out of the window.

I turn quickly towards him with undisguised astonishment in my eyes, and say angrily,—

'What made you fling away the flowers like that?'

His lips relax slowly into a broad smile, and, bending over me close, he whispers very low,—

‘Then you *do* care a little for my gift, mademoiselle?’

I stare at him in unfeigned amazement. I love flowers, but the fact of these identical ones being his gift in no wise enhances my tenderness for ‘Nature’s blooming offsprings.’ He goes out violently as a roaring lion in search of the cast-aways among the tall spiked blades of green grass, and returns meekly as a lamb to replace them in my hands. I take them without a word, whereupon he strides off to the farthest end of the room to ‘cool his heels.’ The subtle scent of the mignonette attracts my attention, and, oblivious of the donor’s existence, I cry,—

‘How dearly I love flowers!—and this is the first mignonette I have seen this year, excepting a tiny tuft of it in an out-of-the-way corner of the old *cimetière*, growing on a baby’s grave. Susanne told me the poor mother had planted it there because it means “little darling,” and she watered it daily with her tears. It is a pretty idea for a poor ignorant *paysanne*, isn’t it, papa?’

‘Yes, Pearl.’ And papa looks at me hard and very wistfully, and his eyes glisten as he adds,—‘And what flower is appropriate for a big darling’s grave? What floral ornament are you going to adorn me with when I am lying there?’ And he points to the graveyard.

The luckless bunch of mignonette finds its way a second time to the ground, and I fall on my knees by papa’s side, sobbing fast and loud.

‘Don’t, *don’t* speak like that, unless you *want* to break my heart! Oh! what should I do if you were lying there?’ And as I realise in some measure the awful thought, the utter desolation, I shiver and moan, and will not be comforted. ‘I should die too, papa; I could not live to be all alone, with no one to love me in the wide, wide world!’

‘Save me!’ murmurs a voice close to my ear; and its tone is so strangely plaintive and passionate that it is difficult to recognise the usually light accents of Bertrand de Volnay.

I glance up quickly, but when I see his flushed face, with eyes like live coals, bending over me, I collapse, and draw

nearer to papa; and, taking his hands into mine, I fall to kissing them again and again.

The extreme delicacy of the fingers strikes me all of a sudden with a new and horrible fear and dread, and for a minute or two I stare with distended pupils, in a bewildered sort of way, first at the hands, and then at papa's face. He smiles faintly, and with the smile the light seems to come back to his eyes, and the colour to his thin cheek, and I give a hard gasp and breathe again. I cling to him still, for he is my all on earth—the only being in the world that I love.

I know that Bertrand still stands beside me, for I can hear his heart beating with a thump, thump, that sounds like a sledge-hammer; but I keep my head studiously averted from him. At this moment his presence is more distasteful to me than it has ever been before.

He is silent for a little while, then, muttering some incoherent words of excuse for leaving thus hastily, he springs over the sill and is speedily lost to view.

I am thankful he is gone; the air seems lighter, a load drops from me. I was happy in the morning, and my first shadow has come hand-in-hand with him. I give a sigh of relief, and try to calm my ruffled feelings by the counter-irritant of rubbing my head up and down papa's arm, and ruffling my hair; and he passes a poor feeble hand softly and caressingly over my tangled locks, out of a double motive of affection and love of tidiness.

'Don't you like Bertrand, Pearl?'

'Y-e-s,' I drawl, with an immensity of indecision, and with a want of regard to Walker's dictionary, that says the affirmative ought to be pronounced *short*. Then I add quite blandly, 'When he is in a good temper, I sometimes wish he was my brother.'

Papa does not appear to be too well pleased at this candid avowal on my part, and another of those horrid shadows that depress me creeps over his brow.

'Tell me, Pearl, could you not learn to love Bertrand as a *husband*?'

I shake my head very decidedly *this* time, and burrow my face on the shoulder near me, not to conceal a blush, but to hide a dreadful 'grimace.'

Oh, oh ! the memory of the little cloud and the big one flashes across me ; I remember the strong, noble soul in which my poor little weak one was to submerge one of these fine days. Are all my pleasant day-dreams to be dispelled by anything half so commonplace as a marriage with Bertrand ? Is he, the individual I have grown to look upon as a table, or chair, or something of the neuter gender, harmless and unobtrusive, to be raised to the elevated position of a sword of Damocles over my head ! Bertrand my husband ! Bertrand, a species of curled darling, a carpet knight, fit to be made a plaything of in the boudoir of Belgian belles ! Bertrand, who has not an idea beyond what is *la mode* and *chic*, who has not an ambition save to belong to the most elite club in Brussels, or a pleasure save the races at Spa !

I shudder involuntarily, just as if a cold reptile, with beady black eyes, were trying to drag me into its loathsome coils. The very notion of such a union makes me feel as if iced water was trickling down my back.

‘There can be no one else you like better, for you know no one,’ suggests papa, resorting to plain unvarnished truth as an infallible argument in his favour.

‘Very true,’ I answer, driven to laconics for the want of a really good reason to give for my disinclination—nay, stronger still, for my aversion to become Bertrand’s wife.

‘And Bertrand is undeniably handsome, agreeable, and affluent—three excellent recommendations surely, and more than enough to satisfy most people.’

‘I sigh an assent ; I am drifting fast into a slough of despond ; I try to rouse myself, to escape from the hole I have half slipped into. A woman, wiles were born with me ; so I assume one of my sweetest smiles, and try the influence of the most effective verb with papa—the verb ‘to coax.’

‘I don’t want a husband at all ! I am quite happy—happy as the day is long—here and with you !’ And I kiss him, to stop him speaking any more on the unpleasant subject. He submits patiently and passively, but the instant his lips are free he begins once more.

‘Yes, my pet, but supposing anything were to happen to me—life is at best very uncertain, you know ! No, don’t cry again, but be brave, and listen to me ! Suppose I were to

die? I have no friends, no money. Friendless and poor, who in this cold world would come forward to take charge of my poor little Pearl—until God willed that she should join me in another world?’

‘Pray God that might be very soon!’ I whisper, in a trembling voice, that is choked with tears and broken with emotion, while I smuggle my cold hands lovingly into his.

‘Bertrand loves you, Pearl! He told me he did long ago, and asked my consent to try and win you, but I begged him to delay speaking to you. But since that I have reflected, and I should be glad to see you betrothed! A little while ago I confess I had other wishes—other views. I hoped that some one else—a man whom I believed and trusted in more than in any other being in the world—might see you and take a fancy to you.’

I feel my cheek flush warmly at this, and a sudden inflation of womanly dignity and pride makes me turn up my nose at the bare notion of being ‘fancied,’ but beyond a *moue mutine*, I give no indication of wounded vanity, and papa proceeds,—

‘Well, fate has willed it otherwise. Bertrand is steady, true, and able to bestow all the comforts of life upon you; what more can you and I—alone and almost poverty-stricken—hope for? Pearl, listen to me. I should die, oh! so much happier, so much easier, if I could only leave you, my little one, in safe keeping. Think of all this, and try not to close your heart against Bertrand, if it is only for *my* sake—for my poor peace of mind!’

There are tears, great bitter tears, in papa’s voice. I can hear them plainly, and his words have wrought me up to such a state of misery and self-abnegation that I am ready, willing to marry any one he wishes—even the old man who brings us poultry and eggs of a morning—on the spot.

‘When you die, papa,’—oh! I can hardly articulate it—‘it will not matter to me what becomes of me. I will do anything—everything you desire!’

‘Is that a promise, darling?’

‘Yes. But now tell me you are not feeling worse, tell me that you think it will be a long, long time before I have to keep my dreadful promise!’ I beg piteously.

'God willing,' he answers me, reverentially, but he does not say it as though life in itself was precious or tempting to him. How can I wonder at it?—lying there day after day, hour after hour, with a man's gigantic brain, and the pitiable weakness of a little child! Surely existence must be gall and wormwood, instead of honey and roses! If he could only be as strong and well as I am, and see the beautiful world as I see it. 'The earth has no single attraction for me—all the bright bubbles of youth burst long ago, and later years have brought me nothing but weariness of the world, and an utter distaste for its tinsel joys. The only thing that binds me to life is yourself, Pearl!'

I know it only too well. To me he has been everything—father, mother, brother, and sister—bearing with my faults, lending a ready ear to my childish troubles, sympathising in my joy. Night after night, midst the big cities where we have dwelt together, he never missed hearing my prayer—the prayer he taught me himself—that I should grow each day more like my mother, that he and I should live so as to meet her once more in heaven. He loves her so unutterably still, though she has slept in her quiet grave for nearly a score of years. I let him go on talking, and do not interrupt him except by clasping his hands close in my own.

'Since your mother died I have often longed for the peace and rest that could only come to me if I was lying by her side in that lonely spot in the Pyrenees. You cannot remember her face—a face as beautiful and as pure as a flower, but not purer or more beautiful than her soul; you ought to learn some of her story, Pearl; but allusions to the past have been so painful—all my wounds seem to bleed afresh when I speak of the times that will come again no more! I'll try to pluck up courage. Bring me my desk.'

I rise and fetch the big desk that has journeyed with us as long as I can remember from place to place, and which, in my childhood's days, was a sort of Blue Beard's closet to me. Brass bound, of Indian workmanship, and with an eccentric key, it has innumerable small drawers, that spring up unexpectedly like Jack-in-the-boxes, and used to excite a mysterious awe and wonder in my infantine mind.

Papa takes out a roll of old yellowish letters, bound together by a faded ribbon, and a velvet case. Opening the latter he leans back on his cushions and gazes intently on my mother's miniature. I stoop over his shoulder and gaze at it too. I have seen it before, but now as I look somehow the portrait seems to show a new loveliness. It is no Saxon beauty, with pink and white tints and cerulean orbs. Her cheeks are rich, and glowing with the crimson roses of the south. Her eyes are large and dark and luminous, and heavy blue black tresses crown her brow. I do not marvel that those almond eyes, full of moonlit splendour, should have stolen so deeply into papa's soul—that all hope and happiness died out of it when their light was quenched for ever. I watch him as he bends over the picture, and I see him turn paler and paler, while his breath comes short and hard.

'Are you ill?' I cry out anxiously.

He starts visibly, as if he had utterly forgotten my existence for the moment.

'No, only dreaming a little!' he answers, like one in a maze; 'but I am awake now. Take this, Pearl, I wish *you* to keep it now, and night and day never forget to pray on your bended knees that your life may be as pure and as blameless as hers was!'

He places the case in my hand, touching it as tenderly and as reverentially as if it were a living thing—holy and sacred, and his poor weak voice shakes as he adds,—

'Bring it to me just now and then, that I may look on her face sometimes.'

We are silent for a while—we two who have a common sorrow, over whose hearts the shadow of my dead mother has fallen.

'Pearl, you must have wondered often why you and I are so isolated, knowing no kith or kin. It is because I made what society stigmatises as a *mésalliance*, that most heinous of crimes against the world, but which truth and love call a marriage of the heart. But who believes in hearts in this century—obsolete old-fashioned possessions that people have actually grown ashamed to own to? I was twenty when I started on a long Continental tour with a tutor chosen by

my father as a fit Mentor to guard a modern Telemachus from the perils and dangers he might run against. We visited nearly all the principal cities in Europe, and, in spite of the beauty and fascination offered to my view, I passed unscathed through all. At length, after several months of travelling, we retraced our steps by the south of France. It was one evening at Marseilles, that, lounging through the streets, we saw, placarded at the theatre, a notice that a melo-drama, entitled "Hélène," which had created a *furor* in Paris, was to be performed. Half out of curiosity, half from a desire to while away the time, we sauntered into the building, and found ourselves the solitary occupants of the stalls.

'Little did I deem that that night would seal my fate for weal and woe in this world—that the star of my destiny would shine on me from that mimic stage. The play was a good one, emotional and fairly acted ; but I sat as one in a dream, my ears hearing, but not letting in the sense of scarce a word ; my eyes, as though fascinated, followed the heroine of the piece, Hélène, wherever she moved, till the curtain dropped, and then it seemed to me as though the whole world were suddenly enveloped in darkness and gloom. When Hélène re-appeared my heart beat high, and I felt the red blood bound in my veins and mount to my cheek. I was in love at first sight—hopelessly, desperately, fatally in love !

'I haunted that theatre outside and in, by day and by night, in the hope of exchanging one chance word with the woman whose image filled my whole soul. I longed for the faintest smile from her lips, as though a boon from heaven. But she was vigilantly guarded by a dark, sinister-looking man, who I found out was her brother, and of whom she was evidently in fear. Days passed, but my tutor's persuasions to leave the enchanted spot were vain ; and repeated letters from my home were disregarded, and cast aside as waste-paper. My heart was sick with love—the love that is not far from the boundary line that separates sanity from madness.

'Hélène was all, externally, that my fervid imagination conceived a woman should be. She was the embodiment of a long-cherished ideal, and I never waited to make any systematic analysis or philosophic *résumé* of her attractions, but

yielded up my whole being to her freely and unreservedly. The time passed, and the object I lived for was unaccomplished; and my boyish, beardless face began to show signs of the havoc passion and disappointment made in an unwonted pallor. I knew she noticed it, for there was commiseration in her glance when it fell on me, as evening after evening I occupied my stall.

'At last opportunity favoured me. The brother was absent, and she was alone on her way from the theatre. I spoke to her. Her name was Aimée La Porte, and her nature was as angelic as her face. In three weeks from the first time we exchanged words, she became my wife. Rapt in Elysium, I forgot that any but ourselves existed; but not for long was I left to dream that perfect happiness exists on earth.

'Your mother was an actress, Pearl, and this was the sole front of her dire offence against the proud and pompous Catharts, whose pure escutcheon, unspotted by a *mésalliance*, was their greatest boast—whose blue blood had never been polluted before. Oh! I have strength enough left in me yet to *hate* them for their scorn of her!—my dove, my white lily, whose purity they tried to stain!' papa exclaims angrily; but physical weakness overpowers him, and he lies back exhausted for a moment.

'My father stopped my allowance, and my wife and I struggled on upon the miserable pittance I gained by painting—but labour itself was sweet while *she* sat by my side. She was my model too, full face and profile; gazing upwards like a devotee, or bending lowly like a Magdalene. Ophelia, Evangeline, Louise de la Valliere, Diane de Poitiers, and many another besides whose beauty has gone out to the world, owned her face for theirs.

'Well, I had a twin sister whom I loved dearly in boyhood, but she too died to me when I married. She was the wife of a millionaire merchant, and riches and pomps puffed her up with worldliness and vainglory and she closed her heart against her only brother. Here is her last letter:—

“PHILIP,—Your insane act has incensed me beyond

measure. Love for the low adventuress you have picked out of the mud may blind your reason, but you must have sense left to know that you are dead to us for ever, so long as she is your wife. Can no steps be taken for severing so preposterous a union? If so, funds will not be wanting to free you.

SOPHIA TEMPLE."

'To free me! O God! I was freed too soon!—too soon! Pearl, when I read the cruel words I thrust them aside with the affection I had once borne the writer, and I went down and swore on my knees that, sooner than ask my wife's defamers for help, I would die like a dog in a ditch. I do not know what has become of my sister in all these years, but I have a feeling—an instinct—which may be the mysterious sympathy that is supposed to exist between twins, that she has suffered as well as I—that the insults she offered my angel love have been amply revenged. Years have blunted the bitterness of feeling, and I would be at peace with all mankind; so, if by any chance she should cross your path, and repentant of her conduct—her harshness to me,—offer her hand in kindness to you, do not reject it, Pearl.'

I am of a fiery temperament—I suppose it is the consequence of the southern sun that shone upon my birth,—but I feel rebellious to my aunt, and I am glad I have time to cool before she can make an *amende honorable* for her misdeeds.

Papa interrupts my effort to arrive at Christian charity by unfolding a blotted, ill-written document, which has indisputably the appearance of the letter of a *dun*, and the paper is greasy, as though the writer, from rigid economy, had utilised the wrapping of his solitary chop. Still, in spite of its shortcomings in the way of caligraphy and cleanliness, the scrawl has an evident potency about it which makes papa's hands shake, and his beautiful broad brow gather into ugly furrows.

'A letter from Jacques La Porte, asking for money. Heaven keep me from cursing him even now—"Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, I will repay." Jacques La Porte, your mother's only living relative, was a fiend incarnate—

avarice, hatred, and bloodthirstiness were the passions that filled his breast.'

I stare mutely in amazement, and wonder if there are any in the world who can boast of so much wickedness in their family as I can; and from this moment I nourish a decided prejudice against aunts and uncles. I recollect Richard, and believe that, in uncles especially, cruelty is indigenous and craft innate. What papa says further of Monsieur Jacques La Porte does not tend to increase my confidence in that particular degree of consanguinity.

'I used to watch your mother turn pale and tremble at the heavy sound of the miscreant's step.' (This puzzles me, for somehow I inferred from history that Richard crept noiselessly, rather than trod heavily, while he was projecting the murder of the two innocents.) 'But I dared not lay a hand upon him, for he was born of the same mother as she was—he was of the same flesh and blood! Pearl, listen to me. It was a blow, a cowardly, dastardly blow from Jacques La Porte's brawny arm that sent your mother to her early grave!'

I look at him breathless, in horror, with lips unable for a moment to form the query.

'Was my mother murdered, then?' I ask, scarcely above a whisper, fearing almost to embody in words so dreadful a thought; while visions rise up before me of seeing at some future date the innumerable members of my family in the far-famed Chamber of Horrors at Madame Tussaud's, a place I have not yet visited, but which I look forward to seeing, the mysterious and sensational having a morbid attraction for my mind.

'Not what the world calls murder, or the wretch would have expiated his crime long ago on the gallows; but she told me with her dying breath that his violence was the primary cause of her death. My poor love sleeps in her narrow grave, but he lives still—lives on rapacity and crime, while his victims find no mercy at this unscrupulous scoundrel's door. I marked him though, marked him for the term of his natural existence—a blood-red scar traverses his right hand, that will make him sure food for the gallows the next time that justice claims his life!'

Papa cries out hoarsely, his face working with emotion. I fear he will suffer for all this excitement, and I sit by him silently, until he grows calmer, and takes out another packet of letters, addressed in a bold, clear writing, that denotes an honest, straightforward character, if there be faith in caligraphy.

'These letters are all from Robert Haviland, the only true friend I believe I possessed ; but even he appears to have forgotten or deserted me. If he was here I should be at rest ; but I have never received an answer to a letter I wrote him just three weeks ago, imploring him to come to me at once, on matters of vital importance to me. Yet I cannot bring myself to believe that he would turn a deaf ear to my request, especially when he hears I am ill, and that his presence would materially alleviate my anxiety of mind,' he rambles on sorrowfully.

I listen to him with a sinking heart, knowing that, unless he had misgivings about his health, he would not so earnestly desire to see this man.

To divert him I try to talk, though Heaven knows my heart is heavy as lead, and a big ball is in my throat. I scarcely even heed the purport of my own words.

'Why does this Mr Haviland hold so very high a place in your estimation, papa ?'

'*Why?* because he is good and just, honourable and true, a firm friend and a just enemy ! Haviland is a man on whose simple word I would willingly stake my life. You could not have helped loving *him*, Pearl ; but I am not at all confident that he would have cared for you, for I know that he has never loved in his life, and he is thirty-four.'

I flush red as a gaudy peony up to the roots of my hair, and feel hot and cold, just as if I were indulging in a steam bath and a plunge ; and, to cover my ridiculous embarrassment, which is unaccountable to myself, I say pertly,—

'This Mr Haviland is a regular Sir Galahad, I suppose ?'

Papa looks at me curiously through the corners of his eyes, and gives a slight smile at my puny attempt at sarcasm.

'Well, yes, a regular Sir Galahad, if by that you mean to infer that he is a man who has never been foolish enough to fritter away his feelings on frivolous and ephemeral affection, or wasted his time in the society of women he had no interest in.'

‘Is he very much nicer than Bertrand?’

In a gush of enthusiasm for his friend, papa lets diplomacy sink into oblivion for a moment.

‘They are like the eagle and the crow, the lion and the dog; that is about the difference in the two men,’ he answers, frankly. Then suddenly catching my look of amusement, he remembers that my apparently innocent question has only been a pitfall, into which he has unwarily slipped.

‘But Bertrand would be irresistible to most girls, only my little daughter is so dainty; you scarcely know your own mind, Pearl—how can you, since you have never mixed with the world, and learnt the difference between gold and tinsel? How I wish Robert was here!—he would be able to judge at once if Bertrand could really make you happy.’

‘Sir Galahad, never having loved in his life, cannot be a judge of love matters,’ I reply sententiously, screwing up my lips like a juvenile Solon.

Papa laughs again at my wit at his Pythias.

‘And don’t mind about Bertrand and me, but go to sleep, papa; you look as white as a ghost, and so dreadfully weary. If Mr Haviland were here, he would force you to keep quiet and rest.’

‘If he were here I *should* rest,’ he replies faintly, and a little repiningly; and then, completely exhausted and prostrated, he sinks into a heavy slumber.

I sit beside him for a while, then I creep gently and noiselessly back to my favourite place, and lean my hot, throbbing forehead and my tear-stained face against the casement. I watch the sun’s glory dying out fainter and fainter in the far west. The wind has risen a little, and the fluttering leaves send chequered shadows, diamond-shaped, on the ground, while some errant beams fling a glow on the red and white and yellow roses.

The August peaches shine like red gold jewels in a malachite setting; the greedy bees feed on insatiate. I do not heed any of these much; somehow the keen enjoyment of the morning has lost some of its keenness.

I wonder what this Sir Galahad is like? At all events, he *must* be different from Bertrand de Volnay.

CHAPTER III.

BERTRAND DE VOLNAY.

‘Love is a god,
Strong, free, unbounded, and, as some define,
Fears nothing, pitieth none!’—*Mason.*

IT is a whole month ago—seven hundred and forty-four hours—since papa bade me try to love Bertrand de Volnay for *his* sake ; I have done my best for his dear sake, but I have not arrived at a tenth part of an inch on the way. I begin to fear that there is something radically wrong with my anatomy, since my heart, that portion that appears vulnerable in most of my sex, is impervious to the tender passion. Cupid, eccentric and most omnipotent of gods, will not be coaxed, but bides his own good time.

Bertrand, meanwhile, has recovered his equanimity of temper, and we two exemplify the old, old story of the moth and the candle, except that the candle does melt in time, which I am not likely to do. He is as playful as a kitten about the house, and frolics do not suit him. He reminds me of a young elephant, with a lumbering body and sprawling legs, that some enterprising individual showed off as his trump-card in a menagerie last year.

Bertrand has fallen into a foolish and aggravating habit of staring at me, just as if a face with two eyes, a nose and mouth, was an uncommon object in the world. He is doing so now, with his head slightly inclined towards his left shoulder like a parrot, and a deprecatory, beseeching look in his eyes, as though he wanted to say, ‘Scratch a poll ! Scratch a poll !’

I turn away abruptly, and a little rudely, and allow him to take his fill of admiration of my back hair as a change, whilst I dip into a book I have found lying in an old lumber-room in the château. It is a curious French romance, full of plot and passion and horror. So presently I cease to dip and become thoroughly absorbed, when Bertrand whispers something inaudibly behind me.

‘*What did you say ?*’ I ask him shortly.

I am in the very thick of a scene where a mother-in-law poisons the brother of her daughter-in-law, whom she has discovered to be her own first husband, who was supposed to be drowned some two score years before, and whose resuscitation makes the mother-in-law a bigamist.

In the zenith of such an exciting relation, Bertrand's tame little whisper sounds like the faint pipe of a bullfinch, and falls like a wet sponge or a dish of innocuous gruel, after one of Susanne's most piquant compounds.

'I only said that it is far too lovely a day to spend indoors,' he answers meekly.

I am rather small, wanting, in fact, in muscular development, but I have evidently inspired Bertrand with some sort of fear, for he positively shrinks from the contempt of my tone as I reply,—

'I am reading.'

Then I remember all at once that I have promised papa not to close my heart, and that my present mode of behaviour is not in consonance with that promise; young as I am and inexperienced in the world, I can simulate. Simulation must be one of Eve's heirlooms, for it comes so naturally to women; I find no difficulty in wreathing my mouth into a gracious smile, and saying pleasantly,—

'If you particularly wish it, I will go out with you.'

'*Will* you?' he says, all in a flutter, and his big black eyes flash out a gratitude that is more than adequate to the favour conferred. I rise at once and put on my hat, which transforms me into a monster fungoid, and kiss papa, who smiles beamingly and approvingly on my filial obedience. Then Bertrand and I sally out on our *tête-à-tête*.

We preserve a dead silence as we cross the little courtyard and reach a long belt of trees that skirt the road to the right of the house. I go over again to myself the scene of the mother-in-law and the poison, and Bertrand wantonly switches off the bright heads of the flowers in the hedges, or twiddles his stick in an absent manner, to the infinite danger of my left eye.

At last we sit down on a bench which the town commissioners have considerably erected for the benefit of warm and weary pedestrians sweltering under the fiery attacks

of Phœbus. I cannot help giving a deep sigh, which is only a long breath, but my companion fancies it is an emanation from a romantic soul, and he re-echoes it with one that is ten times deeper and more sonorous.

I burst out laughing, whereupon Bertrand blushes like a girl, and looks reproachfully at me. A little ashamed at my conduct, I control with a supreme effort my cachinnatory organs, and screw up my mouth demurely.

‘I always seem to be an object of amusement to you—other people do not laugh at me. There is Elise Duval, for instance, she is always civil enough to me!’ he says, testily.

I sneer; his attempt at rousing the green-eyed monster is a miserable failure. Jealousy sleeps as sound as the seven sleepers in my breast, and I disdain comparison with Elise Duval—a brewer’s daughter and a thorough little bourgeoisie. One toss of my head, and then I avoid open warfare by ignoring the subject in question, and rushing at random to any other that presents itself.

‘I wish I had plenty of money!’ I exclaim, with all the unction possible. ‘I should like to have bags and bags of glittering gold, and sit and gloat over them, like the miser in “Old St Paul’s.” Have you read it?’ I know very well that he hasn’t, for Bertrand is not by any means a brilliant linguist. His English is excessively limping, and sometimes, when he is excited and voluble, almost as difficult to him as Japanese, but I feel that I must make conversation.

‘No, I have not read it, and I don’t want to! for money is not at all an interesting topic to me,’ he rolls out in a grandiloquent fashion, just as though beautiful shining louis and crisp crackling notes were quite beneath his notice.

‘There is something I like far better than money,’ he adds plaintively, with his head again a little lopsided. I begin to think it a pose peculiar to sentiment, and I ask myself whether I ought to adopt it as well, in order to carry out papa’s wishes.

‘There is nothing better than money,’ I assert, dictatorially. My eyes have accidentally fallen on a huge chasm in my gingham skirt, and I am thinking that a little of the money I eulogise would materially renovate my personal appearance. Fortunately there is no one to see me—only Bertrand.

'Love is better, a thousand times better!' And then, as if he had given utterance to the *bêtise* with a sudden accession of courage that is unnatural to him, he colours up furiously, and bowing his head sheepishly, transfers his devastation on the flowers to the blades of grass at his feet.

'Phew!' I give a faint whistle, but, recollecting that it is a masculine accomplishment, I stop dead short. 'Love! Can love give one all the comforts and luxuries one likes? Can love produce funds to go round the world, to visit Paris, to go to the Opera, to drive four-in-hand, to buy bonnets and dresses, and—and everything else that one sees?' I gabble breathlessly, overwhelmed myself by the formidable array of wants that I find I have a craving for.

'Love can bestow perfect happiness, and that money cannot do!' Bertrand asserts, imperiously; he is thoroughly warming up with his subject.

I try to crush him at once with a couple of platitudes.

'Perfect happiness is a plant of celestial growth, and when poverty comes in at the door love flies out of the window.'

'Mademoiselle Pearl!'

The tone in which I am addressed is both sonorous and ominous. I have an instinct that a climax is at hand, that I am going to be asked to fill the wide gap left by Bertrand's portly mother as suzeraine of the De Volnay mansion, and that I am not equal, either physically or mentally, to the position. I glance round covertly and timidly for indications of moving on Bertrand's part, having an impression that the kneeling position is orthodox under the circumstances; but no, Bertrand only takes the tips of my fingers courteously in his hand, in a Grandisonian fashion. I am dying to pull them away, but I think of papa's wishes, and let them remain cold and limp in his clasp.

'You like money; I can give it to you! I want love; can you give it to me?' he says gravely, as if he were composing an advertisement to the purpose, but within the prescribed number of lines, in the *Exchange and Mart* newspaper. I feel a little disappointed. True, I don't care for him, but still I have pictured love as energetic and impassioned. In the novel I have been reading the daughter-in-law's brother expresses his affection for the mother-in-law,

before she stops him with poison, in far more ardent and glowing language than I am listening to. Perhaps it is for the best. I can never give Bertrand the love he wants. If I marry him, it will only be to please papa. What am I to say?

He is fiddling with my fingers, just as if he was going through the nursery rhyme—

‘This pig went to market, this pig stayed at home,
This pig wants bread and butter’

‘And *this* one wants none!’ I mutter, almost audibly.

‘Thank you very much, Bertrand,’ I get out at last, after a moment’s reflection. My face is very red, under the united influence of a midsummer sun and the painful exigencies of my position, and a grain or two of dust are tickling my throat, so that altogether I am a pitiable object; but Bertrand looks at me admiringly, and construes my expression of gratitude into one of consent.

He leaves my fingers free, and I gladly twist them with their fellow ones on my other hand, to relieve my nervousness a little, when, to my amazement, an arm with an onyx sleeve-stud that is familiar to my sight creeps round my waist and tries to draw me close. I do not scream, though I feel as if a good screech would do me a world of good; but the arm, to my excited fancy, looks like a heavy chain round a captive. On the pretence of picking up my hat, which Bertrand’s sudden proximity has precipitated to the ground, I jump up more hastily than gracefully from the bench. With a yard or two of turf between us, I feel valorous and self-possessed once more.

‘I should like money, but not yet. I am very happy as I am at home with papa, and there is plenty of time before me to go round the world, you know.’

‘Will you ever love me, Mademoiselle Pearl? I don’t mind waiting years and years patiently, if you will give me the hope of winning you some day.’

‘Years and years!’ ’Tis a welcome and refreshing sound! In ‘years’ I may surely hope to bring my rebellious heart into proper order, and, looking perpetually at Bertrand as an oak, and on myself as the ivy, train my young affections

round him. The dim future smooths all the hard corners so nicely, and distance lends enchantment to the view.

‘I certainly do not love you yet, Bertrand, but there’s no knowing what time may do,’ I answer, frankly and comfortably.

His face falls slightly at the point on which I look upon the matter.

‘Well, I suppose I must live on hope then, mademoiselle?’

‘Yes,’ I reply, with a sigh of relief that he wants nothing more than hope as a support.

This reminds me that one P.M. has struck by the little chapel clock yonder—and one o’clock is accompanied by light refectations at La Roche. I suggest that papa may require me, and Bertrand and I trot back the same way we came at a strapping pace. We reach home, and after luncheon I settle down once more comfortably to my novel. Papa reads as well, and Bertrand, whose tastes are decidedly anti-intellectual, rides a-cock-horse on the window-sill, while Loo-loo, the French poodle, snips and snarls at his heel, taking him for a tame cat about the house.

CHAPTER IV

AN EMERALD HOOP.

‘Coming events cast their shadows before them.’

‘HÉLAS!’

This is an exclamation from Bertrand, accompanied by a heavy sigh. Stealing a look at him from under my lashes, I bite my lips, to nip a smile in the bud. His cheeks shine as ruddy as apples, and his black hair is sleek as satin; on the whole there is a general sort of happy, well-to-do, highly-nourished appearance about him that is in no wise consonant with my preconceived ideas on the passions of melancholy and love. Since the *tête-à-tête* we had he has fallen into the ‘reproachful’ line of business,

and I conclude he considers it requisite to bring in a few sighs and interjections as powerful auxiliaries to his cause. I take no notice, but 'let concealment like a worm feed' unmolested, while I go on with my work. It is wool-work, and the design is a scene from Arcadia, in which the happy Arcadian nymphs disport themselves, while shepherds, with chubby red cheeks that remind me of Bertrand's, play on pipes.

'What engages your attention so deeply?' he asks me, in rather a huffy tone; he resents my deafness to his sigh.

'Your likeness,' I answer heedlessly.

He gets up and examines my handicraft, and then he looks quite complacently at me.

'I see! You mean to say that I am Cupidon—that you think me *un amour*.'

'I don't think anything of the kind!' I retort, angrily.

'This is a shepherd, and not Cupid. But Cupid *is* always represented with fat red cheeks,—by the way! I wonder why? For surely love and chubbiness can never go well together.'

Bertrand walks up to our solitary mirror and surveys his physiognomy quietly for a few minutes; then he comes back and seats himself right opposite to me.

'Mademoiselle Pearl, don't you think that *I* can love? Because I am not lean or pale, must my heart be as tough as your English oaks—cold as your English climate? Every hour I love you more and more; and I count with anxiety the days until you become my wife.'

I stare at him in displeased surprise. I have never had a lover in my life. The words of love are new to my ears; yet I listen to them now with a feeling of distaste.

'You seem to be certain that I shall be Madame de Volnay one of these days! We have an English proverb—"There's many a slip betwixt cup and lip," Bertrand.'

'Your proverb may be a wise one. But my will is strong. Ah, I see you ridicule it!'

His will is strong! The very notion of it makes me smile. I wish he *was* strong, in my acceptance of the word, for then I should not shudder when I think of papa's suggestion.

A little contemptuously I turn away. This foolish

babble irritates me, so I set to work assiduously, and very quickly forget even his presence in the room.

‘Do put this down, mademoiselle!’ and he drags away the canvas to the detriment of his likeness, to which I am giving a finishing touch of carmine. ‘Let me have your hand a minute,’ he begs.

Now, Bertrand and I have been children together, and run hand in hand many a time; but it seems a deliberate joining of palms, and I hesitate.

‘May I take it?’ he says, just in the tone of a school-boy asking for an orange or a bun.

‘Here.’ And I stick it out with a jerk towards him; remembering papa’s admonitions, I do not like to refuse.

Bertrand holds it in his own brown, broad clasp as lightly as if it were brittle and would break at the slightest pressure. With his other hand he fumbles in his pocket. A small velvet case makes its appearance on the scene, out of which he extracts a ring.

‘This looks pretty, mademoiselle, doesn’t it?’

A hoop of emeralds is on the third finger of my right hand, and their vivid green sparkles and scintillates in the morning light.

‘I hate it! It is just like the eyes of a horrible serpent!’ I cry, pulling it off hastily, and letting the ring fall to the ground and roll out of sight.

When I look at Bertrand his black eyes are sad and his red cheeks white.

‘I am sorry you don’t like it,’ he says dolefully. ‘It was my mother’s ring, my mother who is dead, and whom I loved very much, mademoiselle.’

Remorse at my wicked, heartless conduct devours me. His dead mother’s ring!—the mother he loved so much. They are the first words from his mouth that have touched my heart. Down I go on all fours, indifferent to inelegance, and grope on the threadbare carpet through a labyrinth of chairs and table legs. At last the green stones gleam from an out-of-the-way corner, and I take it up reverently and offer it to Bertrand.

‘It is a beautiful ring, and I did not mean to throw it down,’ I murmur, humbly and deprecatingly.

‘Will you not wear it, mademoiselle?’ he asks eagerly.

I draw back. No circlet of his could have power over my heart—it would only be a symbol of a hateful bondage; so I shake my head and hold it out. He looks at me fixedly for a moment, his colour varying, his dark eyes kindling.

‘You will wear it later,’ he tells me quietly, putting the ring in to its case, and the case into his pocket.

‘*Requiescat in pace!*’ I inwardly say; but I reply nothing to his words, although they run in my head for some time after they are spoken.

‘Are you going to try to care for me, Mademoiselle Pearl?’ Bertrand asks, in a common-place tone, just as if he said, ‘Are you going to try to eat something, mademoiselle?’

I shrug my shoulders.

‘What is love worth that is coaxed and forced?’

‘It’s better than none at all,’ he replies, sententiously.

I do not see it in the light that he does. Love, deep, passionate, omnipotent, such as I have read of, I know I could feel; but the miserable semblance of liking—that is all I can ever hope to arrive at for Bertrand, just to gratify papa—is dreadful to me!

‘You see, mademoiselle, that in Belgium women love *after* marriage. *Before* it the *convenances* do not allow any freedom of feeling.’

‘True,’ I answer.

I begin to understand that my marriage with Bertrand will be merely a business transaction. Philip Cathcart’s daughter, poor and possibly homeless, will accept Bertrand de Volnay, rich *rentier*, for her husband, in order to find board and lodging, purple and fine linen. Love may or may not crop up in her heart, but that is a secondary consideration.

‘And would you marry me on the chance of my caring for you afterwards?’ I ask him, eyeing him curiously, to see what stuff he is made of.

‘Why not? You are English, you have been brought up in right notions. If you did not succeed in loving

me, you would never bring disgrace on the name of De Volnay.'

'I might,' I answer quietly. 'If I did not love you, I might fall in love with some other man.'

'What! after you were my wife?' he cries, with all his foreign ideas of propriety scandalised.

'Yes; all *must* love once in their lives. How could I help it if that love came to me?'

Bertrand wears a look of horror. There is an expression of incredulity as well on his features. A Belgian girl would sooner die than confess to such laxity of principle as I have been guilty of.

'Mademoiselle, you are laughing at me! I am sure you do not mean what you say—it would be too shocking! But, anyway, I am content to run the chance, and take you for my wife, for'—here he suddenly drops his melodramatic tone, and bursts out naturally and eagerly, with a flushed cheek—'I have loved you ever since we met first down by the Meuse—just five long years ago!'

Five long years—years in which I have raised aloft an ideal—an ideal on whom I could lavish all my heart, an ideal that Bertrand de Volnay can never realise.

But to turn off a subject that pains me to think upon, I say to him lightly, forcing a smile,—

'Patience, Bertrand, and love may come!'

And then I walk up to the window. In a second he is close behind me, and I feel his hand on my hair.

'Please don't!' I say curtly.

'Give me one curl,' he begs.

'Very well,' I answer, and taking a pair of scissors I sever a tress. 'But remember that hair is a most unlucky gift! I shall never be Madame de Volnay now!' And the thought gives me immeasurable gladness.

CHAPTER V

THE DARKEST DAY OF MY LIFE.

‘I feel a hand untwist the chain
 Of all thy love with shivering pain
 From round my heart. This bosom’s bare,
 And less than wonted life is there !
 Ay ! well indeed it may be so,
 And well for thee my tears shall flow !’

‘MAM’SELLE ! Mam’selle !’

I start up in my bed and rub my eyes violently. The morning light has scarcely dawned, and the early birds are but faintly twittering and fluttering outside my window.

Susanne stands beside me in her short petticoat, and her red woollen jacket, with a half-burnt candle in her hand. I can see, even in the dim light, that her face is very white, and that a scared expression sits upon her features.

‘Monsieur est malade—*bien* malade !’ And away she flies like a spectre, before I can get out a word. For a moment I remain spell-bound, petrified ; the next, flinging on a wrapper, I rush headlong into the corridor that divides the rooms, run against Susanne and a tea-tray, and reach, somehow, papa’s room.

Papa is lying propped up with pillows, and as the pale dawn streams in in streaks, I see that his face is strangely altered and drawn, and that great beads of perspiration like dewdrops stand out upon his brow. All night he has kept a lonely vigil, but, unselfish to the last, he has let us slumber on in happy unconsciousness of his suffering.

The day drags along and brings no improvement, the ashy pallor that fills me with dismay grows hourly more ashy still. I am mad with fear and anxiety and dread.

Bertrand de Volnay lives near, and I bid Susanne run as fast as she can and bring him to me. When he comes I send him for a doctor, the best in Liège, and for the first time in my life I count each moment of his absence with a heart throb.

At last ! O Heaven, grant me some comfort now !

The doctor is an old man, with an intelligent and kindly face. I watch him with my soul in my gaze, as he stoops over papa to scan his features and to feel the feeble fluttering pulse. He turns a glance towards me when he has done, and I see that there is pity in that glance. I follow him out of the room, giddy and sick.

'Is papa dying?' I whisper, frightened at my own words. My heart appears to stop beating as I listen for the answer, and all the while involuntarily I stuff my fingers in my ears in dread of the worst.

The old man takes my hand gently and strokes my head; but I shrink away from his touch, for I know there is commiseration in it.

'Mr Cathcart is very ill—quite prostrate; we must hope for the best, *mon enfant*,' he says softly, but his words fall like bits of molten lead on my breast.

I go back as if in a dream, and sit down at the foot of papa's bed, dumb and motionless; fear has taken away all strength from me, so I can neither speak nor move, and for hours and hours, for days and days, this is my seat, while papa, scarcely conscious, lies with his upturned face as white and as cold as if it were chiselled in marble. Who can guess the desolation I feel; only the heart knoweth its own bitterness, for there is no violence in my grief. Will the bitterness of this cup ever pass away, and shall I ever perceive its wholesomeness?

Bertrand shares my watch, and his strong arm is more useful than mine. I alternate from hope to despair, and from despair to hope; but my stock of hope, like the widow's cruse of oil, waxes very low, while my cup of despair is filling to the brim.

The bright summer has gone, the corn is no longer fair and green, the leaves are searing brown, and the dark clouds of autumn travel through the sky. I see the leafless boughs wave gaunt arms at me in the waning light, while one or two sickly roses still struggle on for dear life against the casement; but their fragrance is all gone, and their beauty all faded. I hear the incessant caw-caw of the rooks, that build their nests in the cypress trees in the old *cimetière*, and the sound makes me sadder still.

All day long I have kept my miserable watch ; a faintness, a longing for a breath of fresh air steals over me, and unsteadily I creep away, almost stumbling on the threshold.

‘Pearl!’ It is Bertrand’s voice, loud and hurried, and I rush back to the room and throw myself down on my knees beside the bed.

Papa is quite conscious now, conscious that before the sun sets he and I shall be parted for ever—no, no, not for ever, only for a little while, until God wills that we two meet again! There is no earthly clinging, no lingering in his gaze, no sign of strife at parting from life ; only sweetly and gently he seems to be passing from the dimness of this world to endless day. His blue eyes rest on me lovingly and yearningly, but a glaze is coming over their blue.

‘My child!’

Is that his voice? So changed, so changed! I rise and cling to him, holding him tight, tight in my arms, as though, poor puny mortal, I could vainly wrestle with the conqueror Death. I kiss his lips, his cheeks, and sob great wild sobs.

‘Your grief keeps me back—let me go in peace,’ he murmurs disjointedly.

I drop my hold of him, I grow calm, but I feel I am choking, and I grasp my throat with my two hands, to press down the ball that is in it.

‘Pearl, you promise, darling?’

‘Yes, yes,’ I gasp, eagerly bending over him. Oh! what does it matter what promise I make?—what does anything matter now?

‘Bertrand, you love her, and will make her a good husband?’

Bertrand draws close, his face answers, poor trembling fingers place my palm in his, and green stones flash on my hand.

Papa is dead, but a peaceful smile is on his features. He has died in the knowledge that I have found a protector, that Bertrand de Volnay is my affianced husband.

CHAPTER VI.

SIR GALAHAD'S ADVENT.

'Love is old,
Old as eternity, but not outworn
With each new being born, or to be born.'
Byron.

HUDDLED up in a little black ball, I sit on the floor of my room. The blinds are drawn closely down—down to the very sill—to shut out the daylight. I see a pale ray creep in, and I *hate* it! The sun, the birds, the flowers, all irritate me. They hurt me by their brightness and gaiety, for he is lying all alone in the dark, dark grave. Oh, papa, papa! if I could only be with you now, with the green grass waving over my head, and my hot restless heart at peace for evermore.

I feel so old and so wan, and my lids are swollen with tears. I am lonely and desolate, a miserable waif, left to struggle with life, with no one to guide or to help—I forget, there is Bertrand. He has been here daily, but I cannot make up my mind to set eyes upon his face, it would make my wounds bleed afresh. I must have a little time, a little respite.

The door opens suddenly, and Susanne, with a flush on her face, and a broad smile on her mouth, comes in.

'Un monsieur, mademoiselle,' she says eagerly.

I shiver and moan on, and do not heed her. What can 'un monsieur,' or half-a-dozen 'messieurs,' matter to me?—I who hate the very thought of looking on a human face, now that the only one I love is hidden away from me.

It is probably the notary with the black wig and spectacles, or the old thin curé with the bald head, from the nearest village, who have called before to inquire after my welfare. Susanne notes my utter indifference to the information she has brought, and, striding up with her hob-nailed boots with the gait of a gendarme, she literally pushes a card right under my eyes, and I cannot help reading—

Mr Robert Haviland.

Another time the advent of this man—this modern Sir Galahad—would have been quite an event in my colourless, monotonous existence; now I am dead to everything—nothing could bring the light to my eyes, or the colour to my cheek. I rise wearily and mechanically, taking up white particles of dust on my black dress. My hair, uncurled and rough, hangs in untidy masses over the nape of my neck down to my waist, and, without once glancing in the glass, I push it hastily right off my throbbing temples with an impatient gesture, and walk slowly into the salon, where the visitor awaits me. My eyes are so heavy I can scarcely lift them up, and I feel that my manner is cold, for I resent bitterly, *bitterly*, the tardiness in coming that shadowed with grief papa's last days.

Suddenly the actual presence of Sir Galahad brings up so vividly my loss that I throw myself on a chair and burst into a torrent of tears and passionate sobs. A sympathetic voice says, 'Poor child!—poor little one!' and a hand like papa's—white, well-shaped, and soft as velvet—passes kindly over my tangled locks. I suppose he has found out already from Susanne that he has come too late.

At last I look up and see—not at all what my fancy had painted him. Sir Galahad is tall, taller even than papa,—he has broad Atlantean shoulders and chest, and a massive white brow, with no single redeeming feature in his face save a pair of dark blue eyes, with honesty of purpose shining out of them; but it is a countenance that invites trust, and will never betray it. Hair of a warm chesnut colour waves off his forehead in broad, bright ripples, and a heavy moustache of the same shade falls over lips that, in spite of the quiet power of the face, are soft and tender as a woman's. He smiles down at me, and the smile lights up his features into positive beauty, while his voice, low and musical, rings out quite a comforting peal to my ears.

'Miss Cathcart!'

But I interrupt him with plaintive accents. Grief has knocked all my old spirit out of me.

'Call me Pearl, please.'

He smiles again, this time benignly, as if he considers me but a small way beyond babyhood. I resolved long

ago that, if ever I saw Sir Galahad, I would make him like me; now, as I catch his glance, I know I have no battle before me. I know that my blurred and blistered cheeks, streaming eyes, and mourning garb have won a victory already. I look at the clock—it is just eight minutes since I entered the room, but already the honest eyes have lent me strength to bear my loss more calmly.

‘Your father wrote to me, Pearl, four months ago, but I was travelling in Switzerland, and ignorant of my address, my letters were kept for me till I returned home; otherwise I should have been here long ago, in accordance with his wish. To me the delay has caused inexpressible grief. I loved him so, and would have given much to have seen him once again—to have clasped his hand, and told him that, no matter what happened, he could depend on me; that nothing in the world would interfere with his expressed wishes, and that as long as I lived my first thought would be to carry out all he would have done had he lived, poor Philip!’

My heart goes out towards him in deepest gratitude as he speaks. He was papa’s best friend, and a bond of sympathy, such as I can have with no one else on earth, binds me to him. If he cannot love me, he can feel friendship, and friendship is all I crave. Love to me, bound hand and foot to Bertrand de Volnay, would be a pernicious offering. I want none of it. Fate bids me live with duty as my guiding-star, and my prayer should be for strength—strength to thrust aside aught that would militate against duty—the duty vowed to Bertrand. Tears fall from my eyes, but, like summer rain, they fall freely and more gently under Sir Galahad’s gaze, and I do not feel quite so desolate as I did a little while ago.

Sir Galahad does not check my grief by conventional words of consolation. He lets me weep on, and only pats my hand with a soothing velvety touch.

‘Oh, papa, papa!’ I moan, ‘I shall not be twenty years old till next June, and it seems dreadful to look forward to a long vista of years without him. I cannot believe that I shall never see him again till God lets me die! If I could

only die!—if I could only die!’ I reiterate passionately, rocking myself backwards and forwards, and clenching my palms together.

‘My child, do you forget the words, “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven?” If your father was alive, his dearest hope would be to see you happy. Try to curb your sorrow for his sake, and wait patiently till it is the will of Heaven that you should go to him.’

‘Yes, yes, I know!’ I assent meekly. In my great misery, I cannot quite quench rebellion against the burden laid upon me. ‘It is wrong to give way like this; but it seems as if he was here yesterday and gone to-day; and everything at La Roche puts me in mind of him every minute and every hour.’

‘In my dear friend’s letter he constituted me your guardian in the event of his death. He bids me, Pearl, keep a watch over you all your life, until, at anyrate, some one nearer and dearer than all others comes to claim you from me. I accept my charge willingly, but to carry out his wishes it is necessary that you should leave La Roche for my home in England, where my mother is already awaiting her new child. Oh, you will love her so dearly!’

His face lights up with a radiance that startles me as he speaks of his absent mother. I can stake my existence that he is a good son.

‘You have nothing to regret in Belgium—no one to take leave of?’

‘No one,’ I answer frankly, and promptly, ‘except poor old Susanne.’

Then I suddenly recollect Bertrand. I blush scarlet, blush painfully over face and throat, and my extremities grow cold as ice.

Sir Galahad cannot fail to notice my blooming complexion, but he makes no remark; perhaps he attributes it to girlish bashfulness.

‘Then we will leave this, if you like, the day after tomorrow, that will give you ample time to pack up. Susanne shall go with us, if I can persuade her to do so, so there will be no one for you to say good-bye to.’

I bow my head—partly in recognition of his kindness about

Susanne, principally to conceal a tell-tale expression on my face which will never escape the pair of shrewd clear eyes before me.

I fully realise in this moment my exact position with regard to Bertrand, and the necessity of acquainting Sir Galahad with it.

What will my betrothed think of my hasty leave-taking and departure with another man? It flashes across me all at once that Bertrand is very hot-blooded. Suppose he resents Sir Galahad's authority over me and affronts him, and Sir Galahad, ignorant of the real state of affairs, retaliates. John Bull, I have heard, is prone to resent insult. The bare vision of a quarrel between the two men assumes to my impressionable temperament the horrible aspect of a sanguinary conflict and the flowing of quarts of human gore, and I feel sick, faint, and desperate. I know that my duty is to be open as the day to him whom papa has made my guardian, but a strange reluctance deters me from speaking. It is distasteful to me, to use the mildest term, to confess that my faith and life belong to Bertrand de Volnay, but I am not of a deceitful nature, so just as my visitor rises to take his leave before returning to his hotel at Liège, I screw up courage for a plunge.

‘Mr Haviland!’

My voice is very low and weak, like the chirp of a canary newly fledged, and my cheeks flame up to a pomegranate hue once more.

‘There is something I must tell you before you go. When I said there was no one for me to say good-bye to except Susanne, I forgot—there is Bertrand!’

The name falls from my lips slowly—letter by letter, just as if I was following out the directions in a cookery book. ‘Put in the vinegar drop by drop, till the sauce has acquired the tartness required.’

Love, I have read, lingers over a name, but this one I utter as if I am ashamed of knowing any one bearing it.

‘Another old servant,’ says my guardian cheerily, showing a set of white, even teeth, a recommendation which till now I have not noticed.

‘Well, we will take him too, if you like.’

Not if I know it! I see plainly that Sir Galahad's great warm heart and generous nature are ready to import a whole score of Cathcart retainers from Belgium to England—if by such a proceeding he can assuage my sorrow a whit.

'Yes, that will be a capital idea! Bertrand will be a nice companion for Susanne; for although the servants at Glen-thorn are good, faithful souls, they are not strong at languages, and I am afraid French or Flemish is beyond them,' and he laughs out brightly.

Such a game of cross-purposes and crooked answers at another time would have excited my risible faculties beyond my control. But I cannot laugh now. The conclusion to which he has jumped regarding the social status of Bertrand makes my confession doubly difficult, and my confusion ten times greater.

'Bertrand is not a servant,' I mutter, in an unintelligible sort of way, as though I had suddenly lost all my teeth.

My companion seems scarcely able to make head or tail of the gist I am driving at, but I fancy a *je ne sais quoi* in my manner excites his attention.

'Who, then, may he be?'

The stupendous question, grave and stern, falls like a thunderbolt, and makes me nervous.

'He is my *fiancé*,' I blurt out, in a species of suppressed sob, and my auditor starts visibly, as though I had administered an electric shock. There is an uncomfortable and awkward silence for a second or so. When next he speaks, although his words are kind and considerate, his accents are grown cold and hard. I feel the difference, and am angry with Bertrand, for he is the cause of the change in my new-found friend.

'I can quite understand how deeply you must grieve at leaving La Roche, under the circumstances, Miss Cathcart.'

I wince beneath a fancied touch of sarcasm in Sir Galahad's voice, and I look at him reproachfully, as the formal appellation meets my ear—but he does not appear to heed my mute appeal.

He is standing up, with his back to the empty grate, and his coat-tail elevated after the fashion peculiar to Britons. A decided cloud has settled upon his brow, and the smile that renders him pleasant to look upon is nowhere. He is at his

plainest, yet I read strength and goodness in his features, and prefer them to any manly beauty I have seen.

‘To be guardian to anyone is a very serious office, but to be guardian to a young lady engaged to another man, and a man of whom I know nothing, is a position most painful and perplexing.’

I turn up my eyes piteous and pleading. I feel so unutterably forlorn. Surely he is not going to cast me off, and leave me rudderless in the ocean of life. I think he divines my thoughts, for he goes on,—

‘I do not know how I can repudiate the charge laid on me, but my old friend should have been more considerate—he should have told me of this.’

‘He could not have told you,’ I cry vehemently. ‘His lips were sealed by death. Papa, dear papa, who never did anything wrong in his life, oh, do not blame him, for God’s sake! I will tell you the whole story, Mr Haviland. When papa wrote to you he was very ill, and his anxiety to see you, united to the disappointment of not hearing from you, I believe, hastened the end. There was no one he cared for but you—no one he trusted on earth but you; and the dreadful thought that I should be left homeless and friendless nearly broke his heart. So, when he was dying, to let him die happier, I pledged myself to marry Bertrand de Volnay; that is all.’

‘And you love him, of course; and would prefer remaining at La Roche, if it can possibly be arranged for you to do so?’

Is he obtuse, this man with his broad brow and clever face? Can he not read my feelings without giving me the shame and pain of embodying them in words that must be derogatory to my future husband, and which I would as lief leave unuttered! There is no help for me, I see plainly; Sir Galahad has planted himself firmly in the third position—his head is erect, his chest out, as if the drill-sergeant was at his elbow—and his eyes fixed steadily and unflinchingly upon my changing countenance; he is watching the play of each feature, and drawing false conclusions from the foolish agitation I evince.

Perhaps it is best to let him believe that I *do* care for Bertrand—but no, I cannot be a hypocrite.

‘There is only one thing I shall regret at La Roche, and that will be the sight of that grave,’ and I point sadly to the *cimetière*, which can be seen from the window. ‘Mr Haviland, since you ask the question, I must answer you in all truth. I do *not* love Bertrand de Volnay, but I shall be his wife at some future day, for I promised papa I would. I shall be quite ready to leave this at the time you desire.’

I rise and make him a low courtesy, which I have learnt in the dancing academy at Liège for the *minuet de la cour*, and I sail out of the room. I feel hurt at his manner, and oppressed by a sense of imaginary injustice, but I hope he does not see my quivering lips and the trembling of my hands.

I reach my *sanctum sanctorum*, and listen intently for the sound of steps leaving the house. He is crossing the hall, his tread is light and elastic; Sir Galahad has recovered his serenity—*esto perpetua!*

CHAPTER VII.

MY BETROTHED.

‘I cannot love him;
Yet I suppose him virtuous, know him noble,
Of great estate, of fresh and stainless youth,
But yet I cannot love him.
He might have took his answer long ago.’
Shakespeare.

SUSANNE and I have been astir since daybreak, and all preparations are complete for leaving La Roche to-morrow, in accordance with my guardian’s wish. Poor old La Roche!—the spot where I have passed five happy years—years in which my life has glided by as peacefully and smoothly as the summer sea. As the hour for leaving it approaches, my eyes and heart fill; to-morrow will take me so far away from the quiet *cimetière*—from the grave which the nodding grass waves over now! I throw myself on the bed and cry, like Mariana in the ‘Moated Grange,’—

‘I am a-weary, a-weary,
I would that I were dead!’

‘Monsieur de Volnay, mademoiselle!’

I shrink into myself as I hear the name, but I know that it is not possible to defer longer a meeting. My knees begin to tremble, and my head swims round; but, as I walk into the room where he is, I am outwardly calm and collected enough. Bertrand’s eyes are not the keen and shrewd ones of Sir Galahad, and he will detect no fluttering or emotion about me. He rushes forward to meet me at the door, to greet me *warmly*—a fervour I elude, but which I suppose our relation towards each other entitles him to evince. I hold myself up to the fullest height that five feet three inches can reach, and doff a semblance of dignity. The dignity is sham, for at heart I feel a very craven; but it succeeds in its object, for it impresses Bertrand with a proper sense of decorum, and he subsides at once from a violent boil into a gentle simmer. With a little more management on my part, I may bring him down to freezing point, where I should be pleased to see him—for, in spite of will and duty, I *cannot* love this Belgian. I sit down at a respectable distance from where he has taken his stand, his hat in hand, and irreproachably dressed for this first visit to his *fiancée*, and I wave him to a chair. He obeys the mute expression of my wish, and settles down at once in the spot indicated in a manner which, though obliging, is slightly mechanical. No matter; I am indifferent—perfectly, horribly indifferent to everything.

‘Bertrand,’ I say at last, in a weary, apathetic voice, that has no fall or rise about it, but drops out flat and monotonous—for speech tires me now, like all else,—‘it is a very fortunate circumstance that you called here to-day; otherwise we should not have met again. To-morrow I leave La Roche for England.’

‘For England!’ he gasps out, breathless and aghast, with a strange look of surprise on his features. Then he flings himself, reckless of damages, on his knees before me, in an impetuous fashion, and, whether I will or not, seizes my hands in a frantic grasp.

A momentary struggle ensues between us, in which, not-

withstanding my weakness, I come off victor, with my hands free.

‘Yes, to England,’ I re-echo, calmly and distinctly ; adding, in a matter-of-fact tone, just as if I was informing a perfect stranger, possessing no interest in me or my movements, ‘Mr Haviland, whom papa appointed my guardian, has come to fetch me, and of course I must go.’

Bertrand is flesh and blood ; but I forget the fact, and treat him as cavalierly as though he were a wooden block or a stone. He jumps up from his kneeling posture and faces me. He has lost his temper—he has forgotten the precept of his youth, ‘but, children, you must never let your angry passions rise.’

One hand, a short hand, brownish and plebeian about the fingers, he passes quickly through his thick black hair, and it stands on end just in the centre of his head like a clown’s in a pantomime ; the other hand he flourishes in the air like a street preacher. His dark eyes flash fiercely, and his cheeks are all aglow.

‘Calm yourself!’ I say quietly, in a tone that is meant to be admonitory, but which perhaps is aggravating, for he flushes deeper still.

‘Your guardian come to fetch you, and of course you must go! These are strange words, mademoiselle, to make me calm! Do you forget already that scarcely three weeks ago your father put your hand into mine and gave you to me? Do you forget that you promised, in his dying moments, to be my wife?—that the evidence of that promise shines on your finger now?’

‘I shall *never* forget,’ I murmur slowly and sadly. And I look down at the glittering emerald hoop with loathing. ‘Would to God I could cast it to the four winds! Would to God that I *could* forget!’ I cry, inwardly.

Bertrand has no especial pretensions to being keen-sighted ; but surely, even with his obtuseness, he can see the shadow on my brow, the compression of my under lip, as I survey his gift. Surely he must know that promise I made is gall and wormwood. Yet he never dreams of relieving me from it ; he is selfish to the core, and incapable of self-abnegation. He is determined to force me into a hateful union, wise in

his own conceit, believing, poor fool, that love *must* come ! Scorn and dislike are in my heart, but I speak in a voice that is quiet and business-like.

‘Listen to me, Bertrand. I shall keep the promise I made, whatever betide. Nothing on earth can make me break it, save your own will. But, nevertheless, we must part for a while.’

Suddenly the yoke laid on me seems to press too heavily, and I cannot help exclaiming,—

‘It is cruel and ungenerous of you to *speak* of marriage even in this miserable house of mourning. It is unmanly of you to worry me, when I am so unhappy, about indifferent matters.’

These last words have slipped from me unawares. I can perceive that they strike home, for Bertrand starts and scowls until a black cloud seems perched between his thick brows ; but, instead of taking offence at my candour, want of liking on my part goads him on.

‘If I do not speak now, opportunity to do so may be denied me. Mademoiselle, you are nearly twenty years of age, and you are your own mistress. Your father must have appointed a guardian for you *before* you became my *fiancée*, and in the end he had probably no energy to write and alter his will. No man has the right to guide you, or to control your movements, but your future husband, to whom that right has been delegated by both your father and yourself. If you go to England you will forget me—forget the loyalty that is my due. Mademoiselle, you can go, but I shall follow you !’

I stared at him in undisguised amazement ; is this my tame cat, my gentle swain, who but a few weeks back was content with a few crumbs of hope to live on for years and years—oh, man—man !

‘Dressed in a little brief authority,
Like an angry ape,
Plays such fantastic tricks before high Heaven
As make the angels weep !’

And mortals angry, for am I to be kept under a wretched *espionage* lest I should prove fickle or false ? May I not for a little while thrust the mocking future out of sight ?

‘You try me too far, Bertrand!’ I cry, with all the old defiance of my nature, and with unmistakable wrath in my eyes. Love will not be forced, but though I do not care for you, and *might* forget you, I shall *never* forget my promise to papa!’

A pause and silence, during which the fall of a pin might be plainly heard. Bertrand sits with his face buried in his hands, his chest heaving hard; but no word in answer to me escapes his lips. And I stand close by, my blood boiling at fever heat—a sense of wrong, a bitterness against destiny, rankling sorely in my heart. The time, that waits for no man, goes on—goes on as fast in the hour of joy as in the hour of sorrow, and I know that it will bring but too soon the day of my sacrifice, so helpless and hopeless I speak in cold, formal accents the sentence that seals my fate.

‘Good-bye now, Bertrand. In one year and a-half you can follow me to England, and if you wish, I will marry you.’

With this I hold out my hand. Bertrand looks up, and there is a strange mist in his eyes. He comes forward eagerly and takes my hand in his, and holds it close and firm.

‘Ah! Mademoiselle Pearl, forgive me if I said anything to hurt or offend you. I love you so much, and your going away breaks my heart! I was so happy when I could see you here day after day, and hear your voice. And now—’ he breaks down, and breathes hard. ‘Before you go, won’t you give me one word of affection, mademoiselle?—one little word that I may think about when you are gone; tell me that you *will* love me some day.’ He begs beseechingly.

But I cannot say so. I shake my head.

‘You can’t say that?’ he implores.

‘No, Bertrand.’

‘Oh, how cruel you are to me! but I love you all the same. I shall love you to my life’s end, mademoiselle!’ And his lips cling to my hand. I draw it away gently, and large drops are glistening on it.

I am back at last in my own room, thankful that the parting between me and my betrothed is over.

CHAPTER VIII.

MISS GRÆME.

‘Beauty is worse than wine—it intoxicates both the holder and the beholder.’—*Zimmerman*.

WE have agreed to follow suit of Ben Jonson, who says, ‘When I take the humour of a thing, I am like a tailor’s needle—I go through.’

My guardian has transformed me from a human being into a bale of shawls, and stowed me carefully away in the cosy corner of a first-class railway carriage. The tip of my small nose, to which the rawness of an autumnal morning has probably imparted a warm tint, alone emerges from my wraps; but Sir Galahad surveys me over the top of his newspaper, with the same curiosity as though I were an Egyptian mummy that he had just excavated from the catacombs. I long for the gift of clairvoyance, that I might know what he thinks of me. But the massive jaw and blue eyes baffle my penetration, and it is impossible to guess at the impression I have made, so after a while I give up conjecturing, and resign myself to a blissful state of ignorance.

Susanne sits beside me, with a long length of red woollen stocking, which, in the simplicity of her nature, she displays with the unblushing effrontery of a *danseuse*. The atmosphere has converted her face into a Ribston pippin, and it agrees well with the brand new shawl of as many colours as Joseph’s garment, that is crossed neatly over her ample chest. A monster basket lies in her lap, from which light brown galettes, exuding jam, and obese sandwiches, emit a confused rather than an *appétissant* odour.

On we go, past Namur, Brussels, Lille, until we reach Calais. It is eleven P.M. when we grope down the slippery ladder of the steamboat.

‘I have never seen the sea, the sea,
The type of the Infinite!’

I anticipate intense enjoyment, or suffering, or some sensation different from what I have experienced before. Nothing of the kind—I am disappointed in the briny deep. I neither pitch, nor toss, nor roll; the blue water is as calm as a duck-pond, and with my health unimpaired, I sit coiled up by Sir Galahad's side, watching by the light of the stars how the 'veering flaw did blow, now west, now south;' while a family of smuts, large, larger, largest, descend from the 'smoke stack,' and settle down on the bridge of my nose, and under the arch of my eyebrow. Sir Galahad is partial to astronomy. His face, emerging out of a voluminous shepherd's plaid, is upturned, like mine, but a peaked cap protects his clear Saxon tints from the invasion of blacks.

'There are the Pleiades,' he says, pointing to the six little stars grouped together, with one miserable little outsider, that looks as if a tear was twinkling in its eye, and obscuring its brightness.

"Many a night I see the Pleiades, rising through the mellow shade,
Glitter like a swarm of fireflies, tangled in a silver braid,"'

I quote softly from Tennyson's masterpiece, 'Locksley Hall.'

'I see you love poetry—so do I.' I nod approvingly. 'I am glad to find that, like the Siamese twins, there is something that unites us.'

'There is Charles' Wain, and there—what *is* the matter?'

My handkerchief is pressed tightly to my face, and I moan audibly.

'Nothing,' I ejaculate, with smothered tones.

'You regret leaving La Roche—you are crying—pray, *pray*, don't give way like this!'

'Oh! it gives me such awful pain,' I say piteously, as I remove my handkerchief. 'I cannot bear it!'

'Miss Cathcart, it grieves me inexpressibly to see you suffer so much. If it is in my power, I will do all I can to alleviate your suffering.'

'Do try,' I plead, looking up in his face, and winking and blinking my eyes like a new-born puppy.

'Surely persuasion is not necessary for Monsieur de Volnay.'

I am puzzled, a light breaks on me, and I burst out laughing.

‘It’s not about Bertrand, it’s a black that has got into my eye, and nearly blinded me!’

I see the muscles of Sir Galahad’s mouth quiver with a sense of the ridiculous. He jumps up hastily, and arms himself with a huge umbrella, and we sit like the great Mogul under its protection, until we near the cliffs of Dover.

‘I can see nothing, but a glow of patriotism elevates me to the top of a bench—one hand clutches my guardian’s stalwart shoulder, the other one struggles manfully with Boreas, who is rudely dallying with my hat. I peer into the darkness. It is papa’s country, and I love every speck and stone of it in anticipation. I begin to gush over the cliffs, the pier, the station, when Sir Galahad brings me a cup of tea, and I turn into a salamander to oblige him, and gulp it down boiling hot.

We whirl on again. The morning has broken, the fingers of Aurora are drawing rosy lines across the sky. It is dawn, or, as Watts has it, ‘the glance of God.’ I fancy Sir Galahad is asleep, for the plaid has ascended up to his nose, and the peak of his cap has descended over his eyes; but a voice comes through the *cache-nez* musical and applicable.

‘Look, Love ! what envious streaks
Do lace the severing clouds in yonder east ;
Night’s candles are burnt out, and jocund day
Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops !’

I smile to myself, for I know it’s only a *quid pro quo* for my sonnet to the Pleiades.

The autumn does not show the English country to advantage. The hop-gardens are a succession of lean striplings; and the ancestral trees denuded of their summer clothing, shiver and moan in the wind. We reach London in a fog, we leave it behind always in a fog. My impressions of the great metropolis are indistinct and damped, and I am glad when we are *en route* for the north. Sir Galahad’s face, like the sun at six A.M., grows brighter and brighter as we progress. He is in the clouds, with a happy smile playing

at hide-and-seek like a ray of light over his mouth. He is thinking of his mother.

I think, too, how lonely I am. Motherless and fatherless, with no one to love, and none to love me, and tears are raining in large drops down my cheeks when we reach Glenthorn. My guardian sees them, but he does not attempt to console me ; only, as he lifts me out of the carriage that has been sent to meet us at the station, I catch a kindly glance that revives my spirits like a cordial. Blue eyes are certainly more potent than black ones ; a look from Bertrand touched me more lightly than the summer wind. Sir Galahad's eyes send a thrill from the crown of my head to the sole of my foot, and make my ears tingle as if they had been boxed.

Glenthorn is not cheerfully situated by any means. It is isolated, in fact. The house is an old-fashioned structure of grey-stone, built in Elizabeth's time. The windows of Glenthorn are wide, and high, and red, and amber-stained, like the oriel in the little chapel at La Roche.

Before the house, pines stand in heavy clumps, and nod their heads just like so many dark-plumed giant warriors.

All round, as far as my eye can reach, stretches rich, purple moorland, varied by green fields, thickly starred by flaunting red poppies, bluecorn flower, and yellow charlocks, the charlocks that grew near the Meuse—

‘Peeping through the long grass, smiling on the down,
Lighting up the dusky bank, just where the sun goes down.’

The room is a big one, panelled in oak, with a low-raftered ceiling. It looks out upon a prim old English parterre with a blooming ‘wilderness.’ The yew hedges are clipped into curious devices of peacocks and other *rare aves*, and the flowers have a background of glossy evergreens that make them look like gorgeous jewels in a sombre and antique setting.

‘Sir Galahad's especial hobby for years has been to collect in this room sufficient curiosities to convert it into a juvenile museum. Indian fetishes, and tiger skins with ugly yellow claws, mingle with fox brushes and other trophies appertaining to ‘Nimrodian’ pursuits.

Two large fireplaces with elaborate carved mantels face one another, and reflect one another's blushes; and in the twilight, when dark Rembrandt shadows flit hither and thither, the place wears a wondrously picturesque aspect. It is, in the twilight hour, that my guardian brings me into the room, and puts me *sans cérémonie* into his mother's arms.

Mrs Haviland was a beautiful girl, she is now a beautiful old woman, for time has been very tender in the touch of his hand. Her skin is as clear and soft as satin—not dead white satin, but the creamy shade that has a soft pink tinge running through it. There are no wrinkles or furrows disfiguring her face, with its sweet mild eyes and flexile lips, and the only evidence of three-score years is hair white and shining as silver, banded smoothly off her forehead.

I steal a look upwards from the folds of her velvet bodice in which my face comfortably reposes—and my heart is won at once. Faith and trust infinite in Sir Galahad's mother spring up in my breast with the celerity of the gourd in the night. After a little she leads me up into a room filled with comfort and firelight, where I find my trusty old Susanne already installed, and bids me rest. Worn out with hours of travelling, I obey her at once, and in the twinkle of an eye drop asleep. My *siesta* is so delicious that I grumble when Susanne shakes me up as if I were a bottle of physic, and informs me that *le souper est presque servi*.

I sit bolt upright on my bed, with my knuckles rubbing my eyes, in vain hopes of arriving at wakefulness.

'Eveille-toi, mon enfant. Quelle robe veux-tu porter ce soir?'

This opens my eyes fairly. Poor Susanne's brain has been turned with the good old English cheer, and she sees double. She knows that I have but Hobson's choice before me, for the black dress I have travelled in is my wardrobe. My curls have waxed limp and lustreless with the united effects of damp and dust; but I smooth them carefully, and fasten them back artistically with a morsel of black ribbon. I shake out my gown, and slip round my neck a jet cross and chain which compose my jewel-case.

I am certainly poverty-stricken, but youth and a buoyant spirit rise superior to pounds, shillings, and pence. My rest

has been beneficial, for my countenance is less ghostly, and the great broad bistre shades that have encircled my eyes for weeks do not show up so deep. On the whole, with an *aplomb* creditable to a hair-dresser and *modiste*, I have furbished up my appearance to my satisfaction, and, after glancing complacently in the cheval glass, I descend with tolerable self-possession. I hesitate at the door, but my hesitation is summarily shortened by the arrival of a pompous individual with crimson plush breeches and a faultless choker, who throws the portal wide open, exposing to the inmates of the apartment my small and shrinking form. I pluck up courage and walk in. Another face besides Sir Galahad's and his mother's meets my view. It is fair as a snowdrop, and hair like a shower of gold enframes it. The eyes are large innocent ones of hazel, the nose and mouth are perfect. A lovely face, and an amiable one, but physiognomy is deceitful—physiognomists frauds.

From the face my eyes wander to the figure. It is tall and full, it is draped in a facsimile of a plate of the *Follet*. From the coiffure down to the fluted flounce that trails half a yard on the velvet pile, there is no flaw. My womanly vanity is aggrieved. I glance once more at the mirror, and take in the whole of my person in a *coup-d'œil*. A miserable sense of deficiency creeps over me. My hair, in my despondency, assumes the shape of rats' tails, my face resembles an owl's with its big round eyes, and my nose is not worth mentioning.

But my costume is my chief affliction. I perceive at once that Madame le Gros at Liège, though more moderate in her charges, is not a second Worth. I am on the point of pleading sudden indisposition as an excuse for vanishing, when Sir Galahad speaks.

‘Miss Cathcart—Miss Græme.’

A very large hand is extended, in whose snowy depths my fingers appear dumpy and dusky, and Miss Cathcart and Miss Græme make acquaintance. We sit down side by side, and, to my intense satisfaction her silk skirt rises up like a sea-green billow and engulfs my shabby one. My new friend looks *over* me, instead of at me, as she lets fall in a drawling tone a few remarks that are more conventional than original.

At the expense of tautology, I aver again that I like fair men, but fair women, of the indolent elephantine type, are to me mere mountains of snow, immoveable in stupidity. Nature, to be consistent in her favours, makes their brain heavy in proportion to the development of their form. Miss Græme puts me in mind of a large lump of sugar—nice to look at, to peck at, but nauseating to partake of at all freely.

‘The weather is very cold,’ the saccharine morsel informs me.

I answer by a monosyllabic assent, but, fearing that curtness is not suited to polite society, I carry out my assent by a shiver.

Sir Galahad strides to the door, which the pompous servitor has left slightly open, and closes it with a bang which makes me jump. The fair one with the golden locks observes his consideration, and I detect a faint sneer curling her scarlet lip. Sir Galahad is so great a misogynist that I suppose a *petit soin* on his part is remarkable.

‘I am afraid you will find Glenthorn very dull; we have very little society, and no amusements whatever,’ Miss Græme continues, in a cheerful strain.

‘I do not like society.’

I feel bearish and unsociable, and a little crushed also under my *voisinage*.

‘Did you like London?’

‘I did not see it. We came through,’ I answer, curtly.

‘Came through, did you? How wearying! *Dear Robert!* I fancy he was in such haste to get back to us, that he was selfish for once in his life, and sacrificed your comfort to his inclination.’

And she sends her hazel eyes out lovingly and languishingly towards Sir Galahad. He is talking to his mother in a *sotto voce* tone, and does not respond.

I start. Why does she call him ‘Robert’? and, not content with the familiarity, preface it with ‘dear’? She must be his sister. No; her name is Græme. She must be his aunt. I remember to have heard that Mrs Haviland was an only child and an heiress. I go through all the degrees of consanguinity unsatisfactorily. He must be going to marry her!

I am not accustomed to the glare of so many lamps. I

feel sick, and *look* it ; for Sir Galahad draws near, and putting my hand on his arm, leads me to the table, which, after the fashion of Old England, is furnished with substantials and delicacies. He pours out a glass of wine, and insists on my drinking it. The draught that cheers but does not inebriate, *i.e.*, tea, is my sole beverage, and I resist, but he persists.

‘Miss Græme, sitting *vis-à-vis*, watches our little contest with feline pleasantry, and I quaff the cup to the dregs, and smile sweetly on my Ganymede. But I am glad—glad when the repast is over. My first evening at Glenthorn is a failure. I long to be up in my own room, where I can indulge in the luxury of tears.

Miss Græme is holding up her lips in the most forward way for Sir Galahad’s good-night kiss. He has my candle ready lighted in his hand, and by its light I see that he stoops and touches her forehead instead. Then he walks up the great staircase by my side. I am determined not to go to bed without letting him know how deceitful I think him. I blurt out at once,—

‘Why did you not mention you had a visitor?’

‘Visitor!’ he repeats, like a mocking-bird, and stares at me bewildered ; then he penetrates my meaning, for he laughs, and says, ‘It’s only Mimi!’

I wish him good-night, and closing the door, throw myself into a capacious lounge by the fire.

‘*Only Mimi!*’ I mutter. ‘As if Mimi was a nonentity, instead of a strapping goddess, standing full five feet eight in her shoes, and rejoicing in a development of physique which is peculiar to Scotchwomen. Only Mimi, indeed! He seems on very familiar terms with her!’

I woo sleep in vain this first night in my new home. I hear the great clock in the hall strike hour after hour, and my eyes, wide open as ever, stare vacantly at the embers dying in the grate. Why was I born? I am no good to anyone—only in the way! Very likely Sir Galahad, in his heart, wishes that papa had not laid such a burden on him. I wish I could die, or that something dreadful might happen to me ; but I may be satisfied on the point, for ‘nought never comes to harm!’

Directly morning’s ‘silver hand with her fair pencil strikes

the darkness out,' I rise, and throwing my window wide open, lean out to survey my surroundings, which the dusk of last evening hid from view.

In the distance lie masses of purple heather, and a broad stream of sparkling water, overhung on either side by drooping larches. Just beneath me a Portugal laurel throws out its heavy fragrance, and a few remaining clusters of laburnum hang out their golden lamps, to lighten up the dark foliage. The birdies, that began their carol at the very first crimson flush, have not yet finished their concert in the scented thickets. I look down on the sheltered glades, the grassy dells, the laughing water, and I look up to the sky, which, in spite of the waning year, is blue and serene, and I feel that my lot (for the present) is cast in pleasant places.

The softness and stillness of nature calm my rebellious feelings of the night, and sweep away the 'cobwebs' that made me see darkly. In childish pleasure I stand drinking in the fresh sweet air, and feasting myself on the beauty around.

The hot rolls and raised pies, the bannocks and porridge at breakfast, are accompanied by a new face—one so quaint and original that I am taken by it at once. Doctor Rowe is the principal medico in these parts. He is a diminutive man, with a round shiny pate, on which macassar and bear's grease have in vain tried their arts. A pair of glasses perch on his nose, which can only be described by the word 'upstart.' His eyes are small and black as sloes, but as acute as a Scotch terrier's, and he has a novel mode of arraying himself—he looks as if he has just stepped out of the ark, and is 'peacocking' himself for the amusement of the public. I discover at once that he is a permanent dish at Glenthorn, and that no subject, however puerile, can be settled without the circular eyes and impertinent nose assisting at the family council. He fixes his gaze on me continually, and I blush again and again beneath it; but there is something so sympathetic in his regard, as if both he and I were eccentricities in our way, that I do not resent it. He has just shaken hands with me—the grasp, though painful, is cordial. I have unlimited faith in first impressions, and I feel that Doctor Rowe is a valuable friend and ally in the dim future.

CHAPTER IX.

I KISS SIR GALAHAD'S HAND.

'I felt the while a pleasing kind of smart,
 The kiss went tingling to my panting heart.
 When it was gone, the sense of it did stay ;
 The sweetness cling'd upon my lips all day,
 Like drops of honey loath to fall away.'
Dryden.

MISS GRÆME was right when she said we have no society here. Yet I do not find Glenthorn dull. True, she and I mix as well together as oil and water. I am willing to cede the former liquid as emblematical of her, with its rich oleaginous qualities, and am content to appropriate the latter as typical of myself. It may be insipid, but anyway it is innocuous on the whole. I have discovered that she is Sir Galahad's cousin, the orphan of a sister of his father's, who married an officer in the colonial service, and fell a victim to one of the deadly fevers prevalent in the West Indies. Horace Græme, broken-hearted at his loss, survived his wife but a few months ; and then Mimi made her appearance at Glenthorn, in the charge of an old black nurse, and bringing with her the touching passport of her black frock.

It is not a miracle that she is what she is ! Mrs Haviland did her best to spoil her, and her son was a right willing coadjutor in the same pernicious treatment, whilst she was a little creature, and climbed his knee with her lovely childish face and innocent eyes ; but, as years grew on, Miss Mimi began to show claws on her *pattes de velours*, and then the spoiling ceased, though kindness continued. Mrs Haviland tells me all this in confidence. She is good-hearted, and has a garrulous nature, frank and open as daylight, and thoroughly unworldly. She is too kind to dislike anyone, but I believe that, if the matter were analysed, the large lump of sugar is as nauseating to her as to me.

'Of course I love Mimi very much,' she says, with a firm conviction in her own mind that she is rigidly adhering to

the plain, unvarnished truth. 'Yet I can hardly bring myself to wish her to be Robert's wife.'

'Why, is there any question of her becoming his wife?' I ask, eagerly, starting up from the hearthrug, which I am sharing amicably with a couple of Sir Galahad's retrievers.

'Well, not that I know of as yet. Still I think she would not object. I am Robert's mother, it is true, but no one can accuse me of undue partiality towards him when I say that he is very nice, and that any girl might love him, and consider herself very fortunate in winning him. Besides, my dear, he is indisputably the best match in the county, you know.'

No, I did not know it. 'Best matches' are worldly things, that my inexperienced ears have not heard much of, and have certainly not taken in with any interest. At La Roche, I would far rather have married the old poultry and egg man, if I had cared for him, than Bertrand de Volnay, with all his money and magnificent acres. The Havilands' coffers are nothing to me.

'Miss Græme loves Mr Haviland then?' I ask, as indifferently as I can; yet, somehow, whatever concerns my guardian interests me. The fire burns my cheek, and I fetch a large feather screen as I speak, and the exertion of getting it makes my heart beat fast.

If Miss Græme loves Sir Galahad, she will surely succeed in gaining him for her husband, I think to myself. All that wonderful beauty, that bigness, that whiteness, cannot possibly have been created in vain—beauty that the old Greeks called a favour bestowed by the gods—a glorious gift of nature. I peep furtively into the tall mantel-glass to mark if my personal attractions, which they tell me the quiet life and air of Glenthorn have materially heightened, can in any way bear comparison with Miss Græme's divine face; but I shudder and turn away from my reflected image. My features seem antagonistic to one another, and my skin looks so brown that I hardly dare to lay claim to my true nationality. I wait anxiously for Mrs Haviland's response. I want to arrive at the truth—to know what understanding exists between my guardian and his cousin.

My companion glances covertly round the large room, to note if any eavesdroppers are hovering near. Then she

stoops forward in her arm-chair, and whispers to me in a very low voice,—

‘You see, Pearl, that Mimi is rather peculiar, though she appears as simple as a child. When she was quite a little thing her natural bent was to keep me out of her confidence, even in trivialities. She never possessed that frankness that most children have, or the desire for sympathy in her little pleasures or sorrows. She is self-reliant to an extraordinary degree, and a little self-opinionated as well. I have tried to curb a failing she has of exaggerating slightly; but I think she does so not from any wrong motive, but simply because she is imaginative. You see that, although Mimi is charming enough when she likes, and has some wonderfully good points’—I do not see, but I hear,—‘she is as close as wax. It is the maidenly reserve, no doubt, of a proud and sensitive temperament.’

Mrs Haviland is of the old school, and her speech sounds sometimes like snatches out of ‘Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded.’

‘Rubbish,’ rises involuntarily to my lips, but I crush down the sound by a spasmodic cough. It is nothing but deceit, I know, that is part and parcel of Miss Græme.

‘She has never let me know her real feelings, but I have noticed one or two things which convince me that her affection for Robert is not purely cousinly. Moreover, she has steadily refused other offers. There was Frederic Thornton, who followed her about like her shadow for two seasons in London, and then proposed, but she would not have him; and a strange fit of shyness, which is not habitual to her, made her insist on Robert’s declining the alliance.’

I smile covertly under the friendly shelter of my hand-screen. Of course it is a portion of Miss Græme’s game to let Sir Galahad know she is obdurate to others.

‘Then there was Richard Granville. He was the curate here, and he fell in love with Mimi, when she district-visited, but his suit shared the same fate as Mr Thornton’s.’

‘Were they good-looking?’

‘Nothing to speak of, my dear.’

‘And young?’

‘Both are middle-aged.’

‘And rich?’ I cross-question, with the ability of a Q.C.

‘Poor as church mice.’

‘Ah!’ at this ejaculation Mrs Haviland stops knitting, and peers at me over her spectacles. She holds no particular opinion of her own, and is easily led.

‘You surely don’t think Mimi is mercenary?’

I nod my head sapiently; there is a solemn pause for a few moments, which the click! click! of the knitting-needles relieves in some measure.

‘Well, I don’t fancy it matters; my idea is that Robert cares no more for her than he would for anyone left helpless and dependent on him,’ she says innocently. She is no *anguis in herbâ*, there is no *malice prepense* about her, but all the same the words strike home. I fall down at once under a sense of my own position, and am properly punished for the leaven of spite which my nature has displayed.

Yet what can Sir Galahad’s likes or dislikes be to Bertrand de Volnay’s affianced wife?

Apropos of Bertrand, he writes such ridiculous letters. One would imagine by his description that the future was something to look forward to; that in fact, golden youth and rosy love were going to make a paradise of it!

Ten months and a-half still before the sacrifice is completed. ‘Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,’ say I, and I try to thrust the whole matter into oblivion, crying,—*Requiescat in pace.*

But Miss Græme disturbs and mangles my dead.

‘Monsieur de Volnay does not make such an ardent lover as foreigners are generally supposed to do,’ she says.

I am playing at ball with Snap, and he barks and whelps in appreciation of my amiability. I take advantage of the noise, and pretend not to hear her.

‘Oh! do stop that row!’ she cries, with more sincerity than adhesion to the elegancies of our language; and she puts the tips of her long fingers into her ears. I wait till she has uncorked them.

‘I must obey Watts—

“Let dogs delight to bark and bite,
For God hath made them so.”

Then I place myself in a graceful attitude, and send the

ball flying under her chair. Snap makes after it, and a violent struggle ensues between him and a diaphanous founce. As a law of nature, the weaker party is mutilated. Miss Græme seizes the hearth-brush, and is in the act of brandishing the weapon, when Sir Galahad enters. In a moment her accents change from the harsh to the mellifluous.

‘Snap!—poor Snap! Dear old fellow!’ she murmurs plaintively. ‘I am teaching him to fetch and carry’

Sir Galahad smiles absently. He has a pile of letters in his hand, and he leaves the room. I take up Walter Scott and turn to a passage which I have already underlined in the hope of its meeting Miss Græme’s eye—

“ ‘Oh, what a tangled web we weave
When first we practise to deceive !’ ”

I spout for her benefit.

Fair, elephantine women are good-tempered as a rule, if they are not good-natured. She turns a deaf ear to Scott’s precepts, and recommences the subject of my Belgian lover.

‘As I was saying, Monsieur de Volnay is not very *empressé*, or he would marry you at once—there is nothing to prevent—’

‘Except my own will!’ I assert, haughtily.

‘Your own will!’ she laughs mockingly.

She believes that it is in obedience to Bertrand’s wish that this miserable marriage is delayed. She literally withers me up with the contempt of her tone into a smaller space than nature has designed me to occupy, and my face grows darker with rage, for her next remark is unpleasant, and irrelevant to the subject under discussion.

‘What on earth could have possessed them to call you Pearl? It’s a name suitable to a big fair woman, or a large white cow, and not a little dark thing like you.’

I am bursting with passion, but I am determined not to show it. Not for worlds would I let her know that she can wound me in any way.

I laugh softly.

‘What amuses you?’ she asks sharply.

Mrs Haviland was right about her sensitiveness—as far as ridicule of herself is concerned, she is most sensitive.

'Oh, nothing. Only you were talking of names suiting their owners, and it struck me that abroad nearly all the cats are called "Mimi."'

'My *real* name is Mary,' she replies, crossly.

'And my *real* name is "Aimée," at your service,' I respond ; but she has me here.

'"Aimée"—French for "beloved"—I do not see that that is very applicable either.'

True—too true ; no one loves me in the wide, wide world—at least, no one worth speaking of.

'But to return to the subject of marrying, you say that it is your will to postpone your marriage ; I cannot understand your feelings. If I was a burden on people who were not even relations, I should never feel happy or at ease.'

'Did they say I was a burden ?' I flare out ; she looks a little uncomfortable.

'They did not say so ; I inferred it.'

'Inferred it ! From what ?'

'From certain remarks my aunt and cousin let fall the other day.'

My heart beats, my cheeks are all aflame, my tears are raining down, as I open the door of Sir Galahad's study without 'with your leave or by your leave,' and stand by his side.

He is poring over a huge book of accounts, but he pushes it aside directly he sees me, and stares up in surprise at my sudden apparition in so disordered a condition.

'Why, Pearl, what is it ?' he asks me kindly—*so* kindly that my tears fall in double quick haste ; I make vain attempts at articulation for a second or so, and slur my vowels into my consonants, in defiance of the art of elocution.

'Mr Haviland, I know it was very good of you to take charge of me,' I begin in the professional mendicant style, as though I were addressing a policeman, 'especially as I am no relation, but I don't want to be a burden to you ; I will do anything to relieve you, I will even' (sob, sob) 'marry Bertrand at once, if you like.'

My guardian winces at my words ; I begin to think he is guilty

'Why, who has been putting such ridiculous ideas into this little head?' he asks, stroking my hair, just as he did the first time we met at La Roche, and I see the faintest shadow of a smile on his mouth.

'Never mind who; only tell me if it is true that I *am* a burden to you,' I beg piteously.

I fancy I see a quick gleam, like 'affection,' pass over the blue eyes that are pitying my distress and agitation, but my own eyes are so full of tears that I don't see clearly, perhaps.

'Why *no*, of course you are not; you are too little to be a burden, you know,' he laughs, as if I were a child; but I am no longer a child. Since I have known Sir Galahad I have aged years and years in my feelings; I won't be satisfied till he assures me that he does not desire to be rid of me.

'Mr Haviland, though I am poor and friendless, I have still some pride; I would rather work for my bread than be in the way here,' I say, with an attempt at dignity.

It is a lame effort; my heart is swelling, my voice is husky, I devoutly hope he will not take me at my word. I realise to myself the horrors of being a governess, of teaching French and English and dancing, which is all I know, for twenty pounds a-year, inclusive of washing. Luxury is enervating, and since I have enjoyed the comforts of Glenthorn, I am less fitted to 'rough' than before.

'There is no occasion to work for your bread if you leave Glenthorn. You have the far more agreeable alternative of marrying Monsieur de Volnay,' my guardian remarks gravely. 'Are you sure that it is no ulterior motive that actuates your words? Are you sure, Pearl, that you are not weary of our dulness here, and anxious to exchange it for the gaieties of the Belgian capital, with one you love?'

I forget that he is my guardian, and that I should treat him with respect; he has pained me to the heart with his cruel words.

'How *dare* you think me so deceitful?' I cry vehemently. 'I told you before that I did not love Bertrand. I tell you so again. But I will marry him at once if you want me gone—if *you* wish it!'

By the time I arrive at the conclusion of my speech all the wrath has evaporated, and my accents are meek and miserable. Perhaps they touch him, for he answers hastily,—

‘Child, you will never marry him if you wait till *I* wish it!’ Then he relapses into his usual cheery tones. ‘Promise me to have no more of this nonsense, little one. I think I can guess who put it into your head, but let me knock it out effectually, will you? My mother loves you dearly, and so do—’ he stops short, and, leaning over the other side of his chair, he picks up a fragment of paper, ‘and so does Miss Græme!’ he adds slyly. ‘Pearl, when you marry Monsieur de Volnay, it will be a dark day for us all—there!’

I glance up gratefully in his face. Surely his eyes look strangely misty. How good he is to feel for me so! I cannot help it—*c’est plus fort que moi*—I stoop and press my lips to his hand. He drags it away as if a serpent had stung him, and his face crimsones all over. I have offended him with my breach of the *convenances*. In another moment I reach the door, but before I can open it Sir Galahad is beside me.

‘Pearl, *don’t* do that again. It is unfair to Monsieur de Volnay—and cruel to me!’

I do not understand him, but, humbled and abashed, I creep as quietly as a mouse up the stairs, and arrive at my own room without encountering any of the feline species by the way.

CHAPTER X.

A LITTLE MORE ABOUT MISS GRÆME.

‘Tis the eternal law,
That first in beauty should be first in might.’

THE light of a May morning is falling on my ebony locks and dusky tints, as I sit by the window after breakfast, throwing out crumbs to the sparrows. The Glenthorn sparrows are plump and tame as pigeons.

'You are not at all like your father's family, Miss Cathcart,' Dr Rowe remarks.

I am conscious that the little round eyes have been fixed immovably on my countenance for the space of fully five minutes ; but habit is second nature, and I have ceased to flinch from the ordeal, or to blush under it. I only gaze back at him with additional interest.

'Did you know papa, then ?'

There are tears in my eyes as I speak, and, like the Irishman in the play, tears seem to rise up in the little round eyes that look at mine.

'Yes, my dear—well. Philip Cathcart, at twenty, was one of the handsomest and nicest fellows that ever stepped the earth. I never saw him after he went abroad and married. You are like your mother, I suppose ?'

I think of the sweet oval face, with its star-like eyes, and shake my head. I wish I were.

'Do you know papa's sister ?'

The glow goes out of the little man's face as he answers,—

'Very slightly.'

I see that the subject is not an agreeable one, so I reserve my curiosity for another occasion.

'How do you like Robert ?'

The doctor has an abrupt way of bringing out his questions—in a sort of 'flop,' as it were, that makes me jump, and my plate of crumbs is precipitated to the floor.

'Dust unto dust, what must be, must ;
If you can't get crumbs, you'd best eat crust,'

I say, jocularly, to one of my passerine friends, who perches on the sill, in order to cover my awkwardness. My face feels hot, and I lean out of the casement to cool it.

Obstinacy is one of the doctor's strong points. On his little bald head the bump is sticking out in the daylight at this moment.

'How do you like Robert ?'

He shouts this time, in order that his words may reach my ears. He has heard, I suppose, that out-door oratory requires strong lungs. I am driven to bay.

‘Is he not my guardian, and do I not owe him a debt of gratitude I can never repay?’ I answer, equivocatingly.

‘Humph!’ he grunts.

It seems to me that he is so devoted to his profession that there is nothing he enjoys so much as probing about for real or imaginary wounds.

‘Miss Græme, don’t *you* like Robert?’ he asks, with a quaint expression. She is sitting at the table, arranging a heap of fresh flowers in a vase. She is arrayed in a flowing white muslin, and her fair hair is gathered up in a high coronet. *Nolens volens*, I know she is beautiful!

‘Oh, who would not love Robert!’ she gushes, in a way that rails me. ‘He has every good quality under the sun, and his appearance is so noble.’

At this moment Sir Galahad enters the room; his matutinal walk has brought a colour to his cheek, and he looks radiant.

‘Who is this nonpareil that you are eulogising so, Mimi?’

‘Some one that shall be nameless,’ she answers, laughingly, while she rises from her pretty occupation, and fastens a white rosebud and a geranium leaf to his coat, with hands that linger over their task.

I think her fingers must be all thumbs, she is so long at it.

‘There, sir, isn’t that lovely? Now, what will you give me in return?’

‘What do you want?’

‘Guess;’ and she half shuts her eyes, assuming the lop-sided position of the head that I recollect Bertrand was partial to, and smiling up into Sir Galahad’s face.

‘A ride on my new brown filly?’

‘No.’

‘A new dress for the ball at Winthrop?’

‘No, no, no!’

He looks puzzled. She is a riddle that his honest nature cannot unriddle.

‘I can’t guess—I give up.’

‘Doctor,’ she says archly, toying all the while with her cousin’s arm, ‘do you think I shall shock him if I say?’

‘Don’t know,’ Dr Rowe growls; ‘*cela dépend*, as our

neighbours across the Channel say—are you going to ask him to give you a wedding-ring ?’

‘I am afraid that would be useless,’ she replies, while her great hazel eyes flash an inquiry up into the impassive features near her. ‘What I should like would be a cousinly kiss,’ she whispers audibly.

Sir Galahad laughs and bows his face, and she kisses his cheek.

I grind my teeth impotently ; her brazen ways irritate me beyond measure.

‘You are a lucky fellow, Robert,’ the doctor says, in the manner which is commonly called ‘chaffing.’ ‘There is one beautiful woman openly avowing her love for you, and here is another equally devoted to you.’

‘Did Pearl say so ?’ Sir Galahad asks eagerly, and his eyes send a quick glance towards me.

I meet it blankly. He has fallen an inch from his pedestal since he bent for that kiss.

‘I asked her if she liked you, and she said you were her guardian, and that she owed you a debt of gratitude she could never repay—and gratitude, like pity, is often akin to love, you know.’

‘And *that’s* what she said !’

Surely the voice has a vein of disappointment in it—but I am in no mood to conciliate. I look out of the window again, and plucking a sprig of honeysuckle, I chew it up viciously. My feelings are ghoulish. I should like to chew up Miss Græme’s white limbs in the same fashion. When I glance round, Sir Galahad is gone. I leave the little doctor to his havanna, and Miss Græme in a brown study over her vase, and stroll out into the garden. As I cross the threshold, I see something lying on the path. I pick it up, then I throw it down again, and crush it passionately under my foot. It is a white rosebud flanked by a geranium leaf. ‘At any rate, Sir Galahad does not treasure Miss Græme’s gifts,’ I say, as I put up my parasol. The sun, which a little while ago was hid behind a cloud, is almost too bright—but the sun at this time of the year is very often capricious.

Glenthorn, though thoroughly Elizabethan, has had cer-

tain innovations made on it, and a long verandah built by my guardian's father is one of the pleasantest of them. It runs along the back of the dining-room, and is shut in by a trellis-work covered with passion-flowers. It is here that Sir Galahad enjoys his post-prandial cigar. Mrs Haviland and the doctor are playing at chess, the evening is calm and balmy, and I am tempted to go there. I am unhappy. Something intangible, too trivial to define, but substantial enough to be felt, has risen up between Sir Galahad and myself. Is he, I wonder, angry at my repudiating all feeling for him but gratitude?

'What *do* I feel for him?' I ask myself. I once read something that seems like it,—'A sweet full of bitterness, a heat full of coldness, a pain full of pleasantness!' I am sitting near, but he does not seem to notice it. His face is turned towards the door of the room, and as he whiffs, whiffs, his eyes rest dreamily on Miss Græme. She is sitting absorbed in a new novel, with the glare of the lamp falling full upon her, her hair gleams up like gold, and her skin is like parian in its whiteness and purity. Aristotle affirms that beauty is better than all the letters of recommendation in the world. Socrates calls it a short-lived tyranny; and Theophrastus dubs it a silent cheat. I agree with the last. I wonder what Sir Galahad thinks as he sits looking into the room.

'Mr Haviland.'

I speak suddenly, on purpose to arouse him out of his reverie, for silence is getting insupportable.

'Yes,' he answers quietly, not at all startled, and as if he had been expecting to be addressed.

'Will you tell me all about my relations?'

The light is shining upon him from inside, and I can see his features—he is surprised, for up to this time I have never alluded to them.

'What has reminded you of them?'

'Dr Rowe—he was speaking of my father; but when I asked him about his people, he would not enter into the subject. You can tell me all about them. Is my aunt alive?'

'Yes; and married again to a French count; but she

and your father were not friends, so why should you be interested in her?’

‘Papa forgave her for her unkindness, and told me not to reject any kindly overtures she might make. I should like to see her—I feel so unhappy, so alone in the world!’

The cry breaks from my heart—I *can't* keep it back. The remnant of cigar is pitched carelessly away into the shrubs below, and Sir Galahad's back is turned to Miss Græme. The tangled leaves and tendrils of the passion-flower darken the verandah, so that I cannot see his face plainly, but I can feel his breath sweep my cheek.

‘Alone in the world, Pearl, when you know I am here!’ he says, in a low, concentrated voice that I have never heard before.

I glance up wistfully towards him. I wish that my eyes could pierce the darkness, and see what his are looking like. I long to steal my hand into his, for I feel that to touch him would do me good; but something holds me back, and makes me hard and cold.

‘Why not? You are no relation—nothing to me! I want some one to love, some one belonging to me—my heart is starving here.’

For one second there is a dead silence.

‘I wish to God I could make you happy, child! It drives me mad to hear you speak like this!’ he says, passionately.

The words fall like balm. If he is indifferent, and wishes me gone, surely he would not speak like this. I am angry with myself. I feel like a culprit before a lenient judge.

‘I am sorry I spoke to you like that,’ I murmur penitently, but my apology, even to my own ears, sounds meagre and chill.

‘Speak as you like, if you will only try to be happy. You have made me miserable to-night. I feel as though I had failed in my trust. Your father would never have bequeathed you to me if he had not believed I was capable of taking care of you and your happiness. Look at Mimi, how contented she is!’

My rebellious spirit had been growing quieter and quieter, but his last words have undone it all. Why should he bring up her name, as though she lived for ever in his memory. I

flare up as though he had applied a vesuvian to my temper, and my voice shakes with passion.

‘Miss Græme should be contented—she has everything, I have nothing ; our positions are painfully different. It is cruel of you to remind me of it, Mr Haviland !’

‘What has she more than you ?’

‘What has she ? Beauty, friends, love ; and I—’

But a vivid sense of my own want of all the blessings Miss Græme possesses chokes my articulation.

Sir Galahad has my hand clasped tight within his, and in that grasp it trembles less. His face is quite close beside my own, and his hair touches mine.

‘Don’t be ungrateful, little one, for the goods the gods have given you. Now, what has Mimi more than you ? Let us analyse the matter. Beauty firstly. Of course Mimi is beautiful—it would be absurd to deny the fact ; but if I was a painter, and wanted a model, I should not take her. My model should have blue-black tresses, long, and unconfined by that autocrat *la mode* ; she should have large, speaking eyes, now saucy, now sad, with curling lashes kissing the crimson roses in her cheeks ; she should have a mouth like a rosebud, and a form—well, like this.’ And he drops a finger lightly on my shoulder.

I know my own deficiencies, but it is wicked of him to mock them.

‘God made me, Mr Haviland, and it is very wrong of you to laugh at His handiwork. The boys who mocked the baldhead in the Bible were eaten up by bears,’ I say to him gravely.

I am not lacking in hirsute adornment, so that my remark is a little irrelevant ; but I am so upset I scarcely know what I am talking about.

‘Laughing at you !’ he exclaims ; and I can see that I have hurt him. ‘Pearl, your mother was the most beautiful woman I ever looked upon, and you are the image of her.’

I blush fiercely, and my heart flutters wildly in my breast. I am *sure* he is speaking his thoughts. Beauty is a thing I have never much affected, but I should like to look nice in Sir Galahad’s eyes—nicer even than Miss Græme.

‘Now, secondly, *friends*. Mimi has friends, but so have

you—that is, if you do not disdain the friendship of my mother and myself. And thirdly, *love*.'

He pauses a moment. I can hear his heart throb; when he speaks a strange tone is in his voice for the second time to-night.

'Pearl, you have Bertrand de Volnay's love—you can want no other.'

I push back my chair violently, and, without saying good-night, I walk hurriedly through the room. The chess and novel are still in progress, and I am thankful that my flushed, stormy face passes unnoticed.

I go down on my knees by my bed and pray for strength—strength that will enable me to be a good and faithful wife to Bertrand de Volnay.

CHAPTER XI.

FROM HADES TO OLYMPUS AND BACK.

'The mind is its own place,
And in itself
Can make a heaven of hell,
Of hell a heaven.'

GLENTHORN is breaking out in an unwonted gaiety. To-morrow we have 'company.' There are indications of it everywhere—upstairs, downstairs, and in my lady's chamber. The 'blue room' and the 'red room' are in apple-pie order, the *salon* suite, stripped of frills and furbelows, displays its legs and arms like a coryphée, and fragments of ribbon and gossamer bestow Miss Græme's carpet.

We linger at the table, though the fricasséed chicken and devilled lobster of lunch are demolished. A ball at Winthrop to-night is under discussion. Winthrop, Lord Denham's country seat, is our nearest 'society,' though it is three miles from Glenthorn over a hilly road. Its festivities are few and far between, like angels' visits, for the noble host and hostess have passed the Rubicon of youth, and there are no blossoms on the parent tree.

‘*Must* I go, Robert?’ Mrs Haviland says piteously.

Her son is her oracle as well as her idol. She has one of those sweet, pliant natures, that always have crosses, which they bear with a patient humility that to an impetuous temperament like mine is simply miraculous. Among her crosses chaperoning Miss Græme is the heaviest. She has arrived at the age when a weakness for an arm-chair and an evening nap is natural, and even the glory of exciting envy amongst the withered old dowagers by her rare point and the Haviland diamonds does not reconcile her to five or six hours of vigilance over Mimi.

‘Yes, mother, indeed you must,’ rules Sir Galahad, with a smile that is bright and tender. He is always handsome when he is speaking or looking at his mother. ‘Or what is to become of Mimi?’

Miss Græme’s expression is deprecatory. She is grieved at being the source of discomfort or inconvenience to her aunt. In spite of my dislike to her I honour her for it.

‘If auntie does not wish to go, can’t the matter be settled in some other way?’ she asks amiably.

‘No, no, my dear, I cannot hear of your staying at home on my account,’ cries Mrs Haviland, duly appreciative of her niece’s unusual consideration, but benevolently determined not to accept of the sacrifice.

‘If you do not like my sending an excuse (and I think it *would* seem rude at the eleventh hour), perhaps Robert might look after me!’

And this is the result she is driving at! Theophrastus was right. Beauty *is* a silent cheat.

‘No, Mimi. I shall be delighted to assume the *rôle* of papa another time, but I shall be very much engaged doing the civil to some friends to-night,’ Sir Galahad answers, with a laugh.

‘Between two stools I seem likely to fall to the ground,’ Miss Græme mutters, discontentedly. A little more acid would convert her into a lemon cream.

‘I am so sorry Pearl will not be with us,’ Mrs Haviland says kindly, after a pause. I throw her a grateful look, and glance at my black dress. ‘I am sure Mimi would enjoy herself twice as much if Pearl was with her.’

I cannot restrain an incredulous smile. I know Miss Græme would like me for a foil, but for nothing else.

‘She will be too much occupied with a host of admirers to miss me,’ I reply.

Miss Græme, like—

‘The busy bee that delights to bark and bite,
And gather honey all the day and eat it all the night,’

improves each shining hour, and seizes the chance I have given her at once. Her hazel eyes droop wearily for an instant, and she sinks back languidly, like an Eastern sultana, on the soft chair cushion.

‘I hate admirers!’ she enunciates, slowly, with the lisp that affectation bestows—‘I am so sick of them! The foolish babble, the ridiculous flattery, and the absurd susceptibility of most men I meet, is beyond all things detestable! Ah! there is nothing like home, sweet home!’

With this she throws a yearning glance out of the window, for the Glenthorn acres are very dear to her heart.

‘Egad, that’s be-au-ti-ful!’ bursts from the doctor, who, for once in his life, has refrained from putting his finger into the pie under discussion until now.

‘Miss Græme, *je vous serre la main*, as our neighbours across the Channel say. You would be A1 on the Thespian stage if ever you were to take that line of life. I’ll wager my best case of lancets against Haviland’s signet-ring that you are thoroughly wide-awake.’

Miss Græme looks daggers and poison-bowls united at him. Her little attempt at tragedy is turned into burlesque, and in lieu of going a step towards a wedding wreath, she sits crowned with a fool’s cap.

‘You had better keep your box of lancets, doctor!’ she snaps out angrily. ‘They must be invaluable to anyone who delights in hurting and wounding.’

My guardian, like the good Samaritan, comes at once to the rescue of the attacked Æsculapius, who has lost his ordinary *sang froid* for a wonder, and wears a comical air of awkwardness, while he casts a deprecating glance at his incensed enemy. Miss Græme’s cheek is red instead

of the delicate sea-shell tint that is habitual to it, and her white teeth press her under lip hard.

‘I am sorry, Mimi, I did not know of your sudden aversion to society, or I would not have asked Talbot and Fleming here. They are very good fellows, Talbot especially, and I hope you won’t make yourself disagreeable to *him*!’

The lump of sugar reddens, as if tinted with beetroot, and walks away with a dignified gait.

I am on the point of going upstairs with Mrs Haviland, for our quiet afternoon chat, a luxury both she and I enjoy, when the crimson plush breeches walk in with a square package, labelled ‘London.’ Sir Galahad’s voice arrests me.

‘Stop one minute.’

I retrace my steps as far as the table, on which the box is placed, and look on while the operation of opening the lid is in progress. The removal of a mountain of wool reveals a large bouquet of azaleas and maidenhair. I recognise the colours of a ball-dress upstairs—great waves of white and sea-green tulle.

‘For Miss Græme to-night,’ I remark indifferently, without the slightest tremor in my accents. My admiration of the floral offering is considerably lessened by the knowledge that Sir Galahad has sent all the way to Covent Garden in order to gratify his cousin.

I make a feint of examining the pearly petals of the azaleas more closely, in order to conceal a refractory tear, which *will* well up in my eyes. There is no one to give me flowers, no one to whom I am worth a thought, and I turn away sadly.

‘Pearl!’

Sir Galahad’s voice has a nervous ring in it as he extracts from the *pandorean* box (I must coin the name for it) another bouquet from under another mountain of wool.

‘I got this for you. I thought, perhaps, you would prize it as a remembrance of La Roche.’

It is a bunch of roses, red as blood, golden-hued, white as milk, just like those that trailed over the old window where I dreamt my blissful day-dreams—where I wept my bitterest tears.

My heart is so full of memories I cannot thank him. I steal one timid glance at his face ; and I know he is quite satisfied with the small amount of gratitude I have displayed. With my flowers in my hand, pressed first to my lips, and then close, close to my heart, I run up to my own room, and forget my diurnal visit to Mrs Haviland. Sir Galahad is so good—I shall never doubt him again—I ought to add, not till the next time !

‘ Good-night, Pearl ! ’

It is Mrs Haviland who enters the dining-room, attired for the Winthrop ball. In her black velvet and lace, with a bandeau of brilliants sparkling over her white hair, she looks like what Mademoiselle de la Vallière would have been in old age.

Presently Miss Græme sails in on her white and green billows, and close on her wake is Doctor Rowe, with an amplitude of shirt frill, and a blue swallow-tailed coat, which he has borrowed from either Shem, Ham, or Japhet. I begin to fancy I am holding a reception on my own account, with these *grandes toilettes* around. Last of all comes Sir Galahad. I glance up furtively to mark if Miss Græme’s resplendent beauty startles him as it has startled me ; but he is struggling with an obstinate glove, and does not notice her. He lingers a moment after the others have left the room.

‘ You are a stingy little thing, Pearl ; you might have given me a rose ! ’

‘ Will you have one ? ’ and I fly like a bird to my nest and fetch one. I give it into his hand.

He says nothing, not even ‘ Thank you,’ but quietly places it on the table, and goes towards the door.

‘ Won’t you have it after all ? ’ I ask, a little sorrowfully ; and, tenderly taking up the poor little bud, which is too pretty to be treated with such contempt, I put it to my lips. He strides back hastily and catches it from my hand.

‘ Why are you kissing this ? ’

‘ Does it not remind me of dear old La Roche ? ’ I reply—
‘ and of Bertrand de Volnay ? There, take it back ! ’

He flings it back, but I have caught it in mid-air, with all its lovely, fragile petals uninjured. Sir Galahad is penitent.

He takes my hands in his, his eyes shine down into mine so deeply that the light seems to penetrate my very soul.

'I am a bear, Pearl; forgive my bad behaviour, and, to prove that you do so, put that into my coat.'

I fasten it in with trembling fingers.

'I'll keep the rose always, although you kissed it in memory of—'

'Your kindness,' I interrupt, hastily. Oh, why *will* he drag my skeleton out of its cupboard like this? It will come out of itself soon enough!

'Is that true? Speak the truth, and nothing but the truth.'

I clasp my two hands together and turn my eyes up to the ceiling. He fancies I am laughing at him, for he frowns.

'As heaven is my witness!'

His face alters. The next minute I hear him whistling as he runs down to the carriage.

I am watching chaste Diana sailing stately and slow, surrounded by her court of glittering satellites, over the tops of the giant pines, and throwing a golden halo round their dark heads. The old grey house is so still one could almost hear a pin fall. I feel like Robinson Crusoe—monarch of all I survey,—for there is none my right to dispute. Everything is peaceful and still—not even a rustle in the leaves of the passion-flower, against whose coolness I am pressing my hot cheek. It is only my heart that *won't* rest.

'The moon is made of green cheese,' they used to tell me when I was a morsel, and worried to know all about it. Even in those days I had a habit of standing with the thumb of my right hand employed suctorially, gaping at the big yellow ball that looked so tempting for a plaything. My cry for it is not deadened by time; it grows louder in proportion as it becomes more unreasonable.

I should like to put on Fortunatus's invisible cap and peep into the ball-room at Winthrop. I wonder whom Sir Galahad is looking at this minute!

The clock strikes the half-hour after ten, and startles me. I turn round quickly. Sir Galahad is looking at *me*!

'Have you all come back?' I question, in surprise.

'No—only I.'

'Why, you have scarcely had time to go there and back ; you could not have stayed—'

'Five minutes. Quite true.'

'What will Miss Græme say ?'

'I told her this morning I was obliged to do the civil to some friends.

I well remember his excuse for not chaperoning her.

'Were the friends not there ?'

'No ; they are here.'

I see it all!—and he put me in the plural, as if I was a host in myself!

'How good of you to give up the ball, Mr Haviland, just because I was lonely ? How unselfish you are !' I cry warmly.

His cheeks flush brightly, but his eyes droop.

'I should have been *un*-selfish if I had remained at Winthrop, Pearl. People who follow their own inclinations, even against their better judgment, can scarcely lay claim to the noble trait of the army of martyrs—self-abnegation.'

I am puzzled.

'You look as if you had seen a ghost, child—you are so pale, with two big eyes like stars glittering at me. What have you been thinking of ?'

'Of nonsense—*je veux prendre la lune aux dents*,' I answer in the language familiar to my childhood. 'But I am too small, I cannot reach it.'

'And if you could, you would probably find it was nothing but moonshine. The drive has chilled me. Come and have some tea.'

Sir Galahad sits opposite, and for the period of ten minutes his eyes have been fixed on his own reflection in the family teapot. Judging by the full-blown appearance of my features in it, I scarcely fancy he will turn out a second Narcissus. My little rose, blushing prettily, nestles on his breast.

I have given him his tea, and he imbibes it slowly and absently with a sip, sip, which though monotonous, has yet a soothing domestic sound. Presently he wakes up.

'Pearl, how long have you been here ?'

'I came in October, and this is May. I count on the tips of my fingers, '1—2—3—4—5—6—7—8—eight months.'

‘It seems longer,’ he says, with a smile. ‘I feel as if I had known you all your life.’

I feel the same, my life seems to have begun when I saw him.

‘How old are you?’

‘Twenty-one the 10th of next month.’

‘And I shall be thirty-five in a few days.’

A pause, while he examines me earnestly, and, at the end of his scrutiny, sighs.

I am uncomfortable, under the impression that he sees the ravages of time already on my countenance. And to hide my feelings I deliberately mix up the milk and sugar and pour them into the butter-bowl. [W798C3]

‘Pearl, I do not desire to force confidence, but do you not think that you are a little unkind in keeping me entirely in the dark regarding your arrangements for the future?’ he says reproachfully.

He has moved from his seat opposite the teapot into one next to mine.

I cannot answer for a few minutes and avert my head; the subject hurts me, and I shrink from entering into it. He fancies I resent his questioning, and his voice is aggrieved.

‘It is no idle curiosity that prompts me, God knows!’

‘What is the use of dwelling upon events that will come soon enough,’ I answer, impetuously.

He is sorry for the unevenness of my temper, I can see it in his pitying eyes.

‘At the risk of incurring your anger, let me ask one question.’ By this time I have braced myself up. Women are strange beings. I am miserable at marrying Bertrand, but I do not want Sir Galahad to know it.

‘A dozen, if you will,’ I reply lightly, as I rise from my chair and saunter carelessly into the conservatory, which flanks the dining-room at one end.

My uncalled-for levity brings a shadow to his brow; but he gets up slowly and follows me. The evening is unusually sultry, and I have been forced to exchange my heavy black dress for a white muslin one.

‘How nice you look, standing there against that dark bank of foliage, with no single gleam of colour or jewel to

mar your perfect whiteness,' Sir Galahad says fervently and suddenly.

My perfect whiteness is marred now, for in spite of myself the hot blood mounts up until it spreads over face and throat, and my pulse throbs fast with an exquisite pleasure at his approval. In the twinkling of an eye he is bending over me, holding my hands, and saying with quivering lips,—

'Pearl, must it always be thus? Shall we never be more to one another than now? Oh! if your heart would answer me.'

I look at him in surprise, almost in awe. Is he a magician? For at his wish my heart calls out to him, and in vain I try to hush its cry,—

'Then it is not Miss Græme you care for, it is really me?'

Sir Galahad releases my hands, and is silent; in a moment he is grown strangely cold. I know what ails him; he is disgusted at my tone of exultation over Miss Græme, which, in my satisfaction, I could not suppress. Cold is catching: I freeze too, and say in an indifferent voice,—

'And what was the momentous question you wished me to answer?'

His voice is very low, hardly audible, but I have learnt its slightest intonation.

'When do you leave Glenthorn to—' his accents grow husky, he breaks down for a moment; it is the long drive from Winthrop that has chilled him—'to marry.'

I never was good at arithmetic; I count again on my fingers.

'In ten months,' I say; and the length of my reprieve brightens up my face. They say happiness is contagious, but this particular instance proves the saying a fallacy.

Sir Galahad notices the gladness on my features, and his own elongate in proportion. He turns away with an abrupt 'good-night' and I leave the room. He is sorry that he has the responsibilities of guardianship on his shoulders for so long a time as ten months.

I have travelled a long way to-day; I started from Hades and reached Olympus, and here I am at Hades again!

CHAPTER XII.

CROSS QUESTIONS AND CROOKED ANSWERS.

‘Beware of jealousy,
It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock
The meat it feeds on.’

THE window of my room is open, and I am sitting by it. It gives on to the garden, and the evening air comes to me, laden with the fragrance of a thousand flowers, mingled with tobacco smoke. A few feet below me, Sir Galahad, the doctor, and to-day’s additions to Glenthorn, are enjoying the post-prandial cigar, and talking loud as men *will* talk after the very best Cliquot.

I am not naturally of an eavesdropping nature; moreover, a burnt child dreads the fire. Once or twice of late I have been made an example of the hackneyed old maxim, ‘Listeners never hear any good of themselves,’ when I have unwarily fallen on a *tête-à-tête* between Miss Græme and my guardian.

‘And, Robert, she is really excessively forward, you know, just like all girls brought up abroad in a promiscuous sort of way.’

‘Am I too forward to please you, Mr Haviland?’ I say humbly, with tears of anger and mortification kept within the limits of my lashes by sheer force of pride. ‘I don’t *mean* to be forward!’

He laughs. This is my answer, accompanied by a consolatory pat on my curly head. I rejoice that Sir Galahad’s sense of delicacy is not invaded by my boldness, but I don’t like being treated like a child—a pat is so essentially the property of tender years.

‘She is lovelier than ever, by Jove!’ falls on my ears as plainly as sounds ascend.

A tribute to Miss Græme’s charms, of course. Curiosity overcomes good-breeding, and I lean over to listen.

‘But not so lovely as the little black thing,’ another voice interpolates.

I collapse into a corner, for I recognise the flattering compliment to my complexion ; all my face burns fiercely, even to the tips of my ears.

“The little black thing,” as you are pleased to designate her, happens to be my ward, and a different style of nomenclature would be more respectful,’ and Sir Galahad’s accents are a little terse and stately.

‘You speak very feelingly, old fellow ; are you hit at all in that quarter ?’ puts in an effeminate tone which I remember to have heard at dinner as Mr Talbot’s. Men’s chaff is the most imbecile thing in the world, but I go on listening to it now more intently than ever. I wonder what answer Sir Galahad will make ? It is the doctor who has his say next, with the inevitable bit of French seasoning his English,—

‘*Messieurs ! Messieurs ! vous allez trop loin*, as our neighbours across the Channel say. Miss Cathcart is a charming girl, and Robert admires her, as we must all do ; but as for being hit, he is a misogynist, as you know.’

‘No, no, doctor, let Haviland speak for himself, he is big enough,’ shout two voices simultaneously.

‘On any other subject that you please but this one—my ward’s name is sacred to me.’

My brave Sir Galahad ! to hear him say this, I would I had a hundred defamers.

‘Well, Haviland, you won’t pitch into me for avowing my admiration of her. I never saw a more bewitching little gipsy, with the true southern eyes, so full of fire and passion !’

I am obliged to Mr Fleming for having assumed the rôle of trumpeter, especially as Sir Galahad listens to my praises. I jump up childishly and examine my eyes in the glass—they look ordinary black ones. I conclude the fire and passion are not stationary, and, disappointed, I go back to the window.’

‘What countrywoman did you say ?’

‘French.’

‘One of the Faubourg St Germain lot, I suppose ?—the girl looks so thoroughbred.’

They are talking of my dead mother. Is Sir Galahad prejudiced against actresses too, or will he acknowledge to her having been one ?

'Her father was the best blood in Warwickshire—one of *the* Cathcarts, you know!' he says, quietly ignoring my maternal descent.

'I fancy I have heard something about that family,' drawls Mr Talbot slowly. 'A story about a romantic marriage—a ballet-girl, an obdurate parent, and so on—just like those penny-a-liner things, you know.'

'And this is a version of papa's heart-history!'

I dislike this Talbot on the spot, and put him down as a useless drone, buzzing about, but gathering no honey.

'I think I know a relation of Miss Cathcart's,' Mr Fleming says,—'young Jack Temple. I saw him a few months ago, and he was awfully cut up at his mother having slipped on the matrimonial noose again. Her husband is a *soi-disant* count, but Temple swears he is a chap out of Toulon.'

'It is getting late—let us go in,' suggests the host.

Exeunt omnes.

The talk has upset me, and I bathe my eyes and drink off a draught of *aqua pura* before I descend.

As I open the door Miss Græme's shrill soprano penetrates the tympanum of my ear. It is not a pleasant or sympathetic sound. 'Roberto, o tu che adoro,' is her favourite song, and as she gives it *con espressione*, with innumerable roulades, and the fashionable tremble, she looks across at Sir Galahad, although Mr Talbot turns over her leaves, and performs the duties of carpet-knight.

I am seated by myself a little apart from the rest in a corner of the large salon. My eyes ache, and, half-closing them, I fall into a reverie.

'Charming place! Glenthorn?' startles me.

I discover that this conventional mode of beginning conversation is the effort of my quasi-admirer Mr Fleming. As a Roland for an Oliver, I glance over *his* points before I reply—middle height, slight, with a face browned to a turn like a cutlet—that is, brown hair, brown eyes, brown skin to match. I come to the conclusion that he would be good-looking if his type was not Eurasian.

'Do you like it?'

'Roberto, o tu che adoro!' With a grand flourish, Miss Græme actually begins it all over again.

‘No, not at all,’ I answer, absently and decidedly.

‘And yet Haviland thinks there is nothing to compare with it.’

‘Does he, indeed!’ I exclaim, scornfully. ‘He must have very strange taste.’

Sir Galahad is standing behind, and overhears. He comes forward. I see that he looks ruffled, and I am glad that Miss Græme’s music has not the charm to soothe his savage breast.

‘Poor old Glenthorn!’ he says reproachfully to me. ‘I did not think you would have avowed such a dislike to it.’

‘I beg your pardon—I said I didn’t like “Roberto.”’

‘That’s the unkindest cut of all, Haviland,’ laughs Mr Fleming.

I looked bewildered. I am *à tort à travers*, and have not the *savoir faire* to right myself. Luckily the doctor comes with his diachylon to patch up everything.

‘Fleming, you are a *farceur*, as they say across the Channel. Miss Cathcart, I advise you to steer clear of him; he is dangerous—you should, in fact, turn him over to Miss Græme; she will manage him better.’

But Mr Fleming is disinclined to go over to the camp of the Philistines; on the contrary, he draws his chair nearer, and commences, in a low, confidential tone,—

‘I don’t like Miss Græme; do you?’

I hesitate. I am antediluvian in my love of veracity, yet I don’t care to install him as confidant. I hum! and I ha! and drop my fan. He picks it up, and begins to fan me.

‘I see you don’t. She is not my style of beauty either, although some people think her a regular stunner.’

‘A what?’ I ask, abashed at my ignorance of my paternal language—a fact which I attribute to the ‘promiscuous’ way in which I have been brought up. Walker is my authority on most subjects, and I don’t fancy he gives the word.

‘A knock-me-down sort of beauty, you know,’ explains my new acquaintance. I glance curiously at Miss Græme’s well-developed arms and hands.

‘I see you don’t understand;’ and he shows two rows of excellent teeth at my expense.

‘Such freshness and simplicity are delicious!’

I flash him a look like those that used to annihilate Bertrand, and, town-bred as he is, he understands.

'They say that Miss Græme is to marry Haviland some day. She is the only woman he has ever been credited with liking in his life. He is very cold, very peculiar!'

'Very peculiar!' I answer, mechanically. 'But gossip is not always gospel, you know.'

'*Il n'y a pas de fumée sans feu,*' he replies.

'Very true!' The room goes round—Miss Græme's voice sounds like a dying swan's—I feel nohow, and as if I was tumbling off my chair.

'Pearl, what is the matter? Are you ill?' questions Sir Galahad anxiously, as he takes my flaccid hands gently.

I snatch them away impatiently, with contempt on my mouth, and rise.

Mr Fleming sees the gesture, and laughs again, reminding me of a dentist's show-case of specimens.

'You see Miss Cathcart can get on without your assistance, Haviland. Take my arm—*do.*'

I force a coquettish smile to my lips, and take his arm as far as the door.

When I reach it I turn round. Sir Galahad's eyes are fixed on me, and the blue iris is deepened by a sorrowful shade. I hesitate. Shall I go back, or not? No!—a thousand times no! For Miss Græme's head is bent so close over him, as she whispers something, that her heavy golden tresses mingle with his crisp brown curls. The only woman he has ever been credited with caring for is by his side. I go quickly out and close the door.

'I had no notion that you were such an atrocious little flirt, Pearl! The contemptible spirit of coquetry is as indigenuous to feminine nature as oaks to British soil;' thus says Sir Galahad.

It is his greeting. I have not seen him since last night. A fit of unsociability, which I chose to christen headache, has kept me a prisoner in my own room until the ordinary ten minutes' gathering in the gloam before dinner. Sir Galahad's dose of bitters does not improve my appetite. It is the first time in my life I have been called a flirt, and the sobriquet

chafes me. I bristle up like a porcupine, and fling sharp things at my assailant.

‘And as deceit is in man. To my notions coquetry may be despicable, but deceit is disgusting!’

In my jaundiced state I am not choice in vituperation. He looks like a man in a fog, trying to make out what he is going to run against next.

“*Je ne comprend rien*,” as our friend the doctor would say,’ he answers with a shrug of the shoulders. ‘In what unfortunate manly bosom have you discovered the obnoxious weed you allude to?—Fleming’s? I ought to have warned you, my ward—he is a gay deceiver.’

I am angry, but my anger is considerably assuaged by the conviction that Sir Galahad, in spite of his badinage, is angry too.

‘Oh, no!’ I reply, hurling a benign smile across the room to where Mr Fleming stands a fixture, with Dr Rowe’s grasp on his button-hole. ‘As far as I can see, the gentleman in question is as sincere as he is nice. ‘It’s a pity other people do not resemble him.’

‘Pearl, you have been in your room all day. Have you been feigning bodily illness to cover mental distress? Have you heard from Monsieur de Volnay?—and is he the cause of trouble to you?’ he questions hurriedly.

‘No,’ I say again, with supremest hauteur, drawing up my small figure to the utmost limit I can. ‘Monsieur de Volnay, as far as I know, is worthy of faith and trust.’

‘Then whom are you alluding to?—surely it cannot be to me? Tell me, for Heaven’s sake, if—’

‘Dinner is ready,’ comes sonorously from the crimson plush breeches.

We rank and file—Sir Galahad takes his mother, according to his rule; Miss Græme hangs languidly on Mr Talbot’s arm, and Mr Fleming escorts me; while the little doctor brings up the rear. It is a round table, and the conversation is mostly general; and my cavalier’s spasmodic attempts at sentiment fall in *mal à propos* moments.

‘Your protracted siesta to-day has been most beneficial, Miss Cathcart,’ he whispers. ‘I never saw your eyes look more deliciously.’

‘Ruddy—yes,’ says the doctor, holding up a glass of Epernay to the light, and examining it with the experienced eye of a dealer in liquors.

I laugh.

‘Thanks. I did not know I was like a rabbit.’

‘What’s that you said, Pearl?—like a rabbit. Why didn’t you tell me so, dear. We have a warren here,’ good Mrs Haviland cries,—she is a little hard of hearing.

‘I shall be sorry to leave this!’ my admirer informs me, impressively. ‘Since I have known you, life has become—’

‘Too greasy by far,’ growls the doctor, crossly, with the candour engendered by old acquaintance, as he pushes away a plate with an oleaginous compound of turkey and truffles.

Mr Fleming is crushed again, and before he can make another flight into the regions of romance, we rise and leave the grosser portion of humanity to their wine-cups.

For the first time since I have known him, I try to avoid Sir Galahad. The moon is at her full, the wind scarcely stirs a leaf or twig, the garden is as light as day. I propose to go out, and Miss Græme seconds me. My curls are a sufficient thatch for my head, but a white shawl, like a fleecy cloud, makes her beauty angelic to my thinking. Mr Talbot agrees with me, and gazes at her in undisguised adoration, but she does not notice him. She goes up to her cousin. Mr Fleming is dropping *bêtises* into my ear, and I cannot hear the dialogue at the other end of the room. I see that Sir Galahad looks moody, and shakes his head. He evidently does not care about the moon.

She has conquered at last, and he comes out with her. I pace on slowly, almost unconscious that Mr Fleming is still at my side, while the crunch, crunch! of the others’ tread on the gravel irritates me sorely.

‘Miss Cathcart, I am glad of the opportunity of speaking to you. I am going away for a little while, to-morrow evening, but before I go I want to say something—something—’ he hesitates and stops.

My mood is very impatient to-night.

‘Something which takes a long time to get out,’ I answer sharply, with an attempt at laughter. To give him time, I stoop and pluck a large rose, with a deep crimson heart, and

one or two dewdrops glistening upon it, and I stick it into my bodice.

‘Moonlight and flowers! are they not the most beautiful things in creation, Mr Fleming?’

‘Not so beautiful as a beautiful woman—not half so beautiful as you are,’ he whispers, earnestly. ‘Pearl, we have only known each other two short days, but I have learnt to love you—to worship you with all my soul! You have literally taken me by storm, and, by Jove! I can’t help myself.’

He stops to take breath, and I bite my lips hard to refrain from a smile.

This rapid conquest is unexpected. What am I to say to him?

‘Pearl!’ I wish he would not be so familiar with my name, but I do not like to wound his feelings by stickling for dignity at this moment.

‘Of course it seems ridiculous to you that a man of the world should lose his head and that sort of thing, but if you can make up your mind to have me, say so. When my two uncles and my aunt die, I shall be tolerably well off. Meanwhile, we might manage to jog along comfortably somehow!’

A tempting prospect truly, to be Joan to Mr Fleming’s Darby! I open my mouth to speak, but he stops me before I can get out a word.

‘There can be nothing to prevent our marriage. You are Haviland’s ward, but he’s nobody—not like a parent, or that sort of thing. The whole affair can be put *en train* as soon as you like, and we might reach Paris in time for the Grand Prix. What do you think?’

Think! I am bewildered. He takes advantage of it, and, like the man with the cork leg, is off again as fast as he can.

‘Why don’t you speak? Don’t you like me? Are there any objections?’

‘Ask my guardian,’ I answer.

‘Very well; but to show that you like me give me that rose.’

My queen of flowers, my beautiful rose, with the tender, bleeding heart and tear-drops. I know it is too good for him, and I hesitate.

Crunch! crunch! The steps are quite close behind us now. I turn and face them. A white, rounded arm is entwined

lovingly in Sir Galahad's, sweet Hebe features are lifted up in the moonlight. I take the rose from my bosom and give it to Mr Fleming, and its crimson petals are pressed against his lips. I feel it is desecration, and I move away.

'I have a little matter of business to discuss with Miss Cathcart to-night. Excuse us, Fleming, for a moment,' and Sir Galahad unceremoniously detaches himself from Miss Græme, and draws my hand through his arm.

Before I know where I am, he and I are walking under an avenue of lime-trees that skirt the garden at the furthest extremity.

'Pearl,'—my guardian's tone is grave, and, as I peep up furtively, I can trace in the silvery light a big shadow traversing his brow,—'it is my duty to speak to you, but, if you knew how deeply it grieves me to find fault, you would forgive me my ungrateful task.'

Never—never was there such a pattern guardian!—so gentle and so kind. I soften already under the influence of his musical voice.

'You are young and thoughtless, you mean no wrong, but what you do in the innocence of your heart the world misconstrues.'

'Your world—Miss Græme!' I cry flippantly. I have an instinct that she has been backbiting me again.

'Yes, Miss Græme certainly has remarked on your conduct with Mr Fleming. She is older than you, Pearl, and more prudent. She only speaks for your sake.'

Pshaw!—for my sake!

'My conduct with Mr Fleming? What is my offence?'

'Child, you are, unawares to yourself, putting it into his power to compromise you. He is giddy, impressionable, and fickle; he is trifling with you—flirting with you only *pour passer le temps*.'

'To pass a *very long* time, then! Mr Fleming asked me this evening to marry him,' I retort, with all the *sang froid* of a young lady to whom proposals are as common as breakfast.

'And what answer did you make him?'

'I referred him to my guardian,' I say demurely.

'Pearl, was it *before* or *after* his offer that you gave him that rose which I saw him kiss?'

‘After.’

I screw up my mouth very hard, or I shall laugh outright at his look of horror at the encouragement I have given my swain.

‘What will Miss Græme think of the rose episode?’ I ask saucily.

‘Think! why, that you are *wicked* to act like this—to put both yourself and me into a most painful position. I am disappointed in you; and Mimi judged you far better than I did!’

How *dare* he say this! My heart feels bursting. I unloose my arm from his, and walk on hurriedly.

‘Pray, what answer am I to give to Mr Fleming?’

His accents are so cold and cutting, they chill me through, though my head is burning hot.

‘Say that I am engaged already—that all my love and trust are given to Bertrand de Volnay,’ I flash out passionately.

His face looks ghastly in the moonlight; all the anger has gone out of his eyes, even as I speak. Woe’s me! I have sinned in the sight of Heaven. I have uttered a fearful lie!

CHAPTER XIII.

PLUCKING APRICOTS.

‘In many ways does the full heart reveal
The presence of the love it would conceal.’

MRS HAVILAND looks intently at me over her spectacles. The inspection is evidently unsatisfactory, for she says,—

‘You look as white as a ghost, child! you should go and take some fresh air.’

I shake my head. Fresh air has no attraction for me—nothing has. Bulwer’s ‘Last of the Barons’ lies on my lap, but for half-an-hour I have not turned over a page. Mrs Haviland resumes her knitting for a few minutes. Then it drops, and she studies me again.

‘Pearl, what ails you?’

‘Nothing.’

The word seems to come up from the very bottom of the Slough of Despond, and it ends in an explosive whisper that startles her. Her eyes look sorry for me, and she begins rummaging in her pocket, while I watch her in dread, lest she, like the Wizard of the North, should conjure up a black dose or something nasty for my benefit. To my intense relief, a large key is the sole result.

‘Open the cupboard in my room, and in the left-hand corner of the right-hand drawer you will find a basket. I want you to go and pick some apricots for dessert, Pearl, dear; I never had any trouble with poor old Benson the gardener when he was alive; but Nicols is so rough, he always takes the bloom off.’

I smile faintly as I see through her thin device—what she wants is to put the bloom on my cheeks. I kiss her, and start on my errand listless and languid. On the way I lean over the old sun-dial that has stood hundreds of years. It is all chipped and broken, but wonderfully picturesque. Five o’clock has struck, and fiery old Phœbus is going away fast towards the west. The lime-trees wrap me in their fragrance, and in the distance the tinkle of a sheep-bell falls on the stilly air.

I am thinking of La Roche, and wishing for the happy, peaceful days that can come again no more—

‘When my heart was light, and my hopes were bright,
And my brow untouched by care.’

Ay de mi!

Glenthorn is unusually quiet. The visitors left long ago, and ever since the evening of Mr Fleming’s offer Sir Galahad has had an access of business which takes him out after breakfast, to return only in time for the seven o’clock dinner. He looks pale and worried, and when his mother asks what ails him, he always answers ‘Nothing!’

The empty basket on the dial recalls my wandering thoughts to practical every-day life, and taking it up I proceed to the orchard. Nicols, the new gardener, eyes me suspiciously, as though I had come to trespass on his preserves; but I pass him indifferently, and go on until I reach the southern wall.

He has been at the fruit after all, for not an apricot is left on the lower branches of the tree. Beauties, large, mellow, and luscious, hang above, just beyond my reach. I look round, and spy a short ladder, and seizing on it, I clamber on like a tomboy to the top, and mechanically carry out Mrs Haviland's desire. One by one I pluck carefully, handling them tenderly. At last the basket is full of beautiful blooming yellow fruit. I inspect my handiwork complacently.

'Pearl!'

I give a violent start, and down goes my basket, while bruised apricots stare up at me from all parts of the earth. I gaze back at them in dismay.

'Mrs Haviland particularly wanted the bloom on,' I say, piteously; whereupon Sir Galahad laughs out; but the next moment his face resumes the grave, harassed look it has worn of late.

'You have come back early to-day,' I venture to remark; somehow a constraint has risen up between us which I have not the power to break down.

'Early?—why, it is past seven; and my mother feared you had forgotten all about dinner.'

The little reverie I indulged in on the sun-dial is the culprit. I don't answer, for the simple reason that I don't know what to say. I stoop, and begin picking up my scattered spoil, and Sir Galahad helps me.

'These are damaged all over, and are good for nothing,' he says, as he examines half-a-dozen and flings them down again.

'I am *so* sorry!' I reply, *les larmes à la voix*.

He leaves off stooping and stands erect.

'Do you really mean to say that hurting this paltry fruit is a source of sorrow to you?'

Surely he does not think me hypocritical! At the bare thought of such a thing the tears vacate my voice, and take up their stand in my eyes.

'And yet you are the cause of hurting a human heart—you are the cause of spoiling a human life, Pearl!' he says, passionately.

I look at him aghast. From his serious countenance I draw hasty conclusions.

'Why, has he done anything?' I murmur, hesitatingly.

I have a horrible presentiment that human blood lies on my head, but I dare not embody my thought in words.

‘Has *who* done anything?’

‘Mr Fleming.’

‘Pshaw!’ And distinctly I trace the mark of Sir Galahad’s heel on the ground as he grinds it in impatience. ‘Why do your thoughts run on Mr Fleming, if you do not care for him?’

This seems to me a weak argument, for I know that Bertrand often runs in my head, and yet I do not care for him; but I feel too languid to be argumentative, so I let him keep his own views of the case, and go back to the starting point of our dialogue.

‘Nicols takes the palm from me after all. He may rub off the bloom, but he would have left the fruit intact at any rate,’ I say regretfully.

‘If you take off the bloom, you may as well destroy altogether,’ Sir Galahad remarks, sententiously.

I glance at him in surprise. Again his reasoning sounds feeble. Apricots intact are good for jam, even if unfitted for dessert; but fearing he may think me self-sufficient about cookery lore, I hold my tongue.

‘I have not much experience in these things myself, but I have heard that women are apt to handle tenderly, and then let go suddenly and cruelly.’

‘You know I would not do such a thing!’ I flare out indignantly—‘if it was only to please Mrs Haviland.’

‘And not me, Pearl?’ he answers, while his eyes darken with a deeper blue.

‘I did not know you cared,’ I say in surprise.

A weakness for gastronomy is the last I should have credited him with; but we live and learn.

‘You didn’t know that I cared, Pearl!’ he exclaims, reproachfully,—‘I, to whom your slightest word or action is of moment.’

‘Well, I *did* handle tenderly enough. Oh! how Mrs Haviland will blame me.’

‘She knows nothing—she will not be vexed.’

‘And what am I to say to her? I cannot tell a fib; and besides, Nicols knows all about it.’

‘Nicols!—why, what on earth do you mean, Pearl?’

‘I mean that he was watching, and that he is sure to talk about it to the other servants. Of course to him it’s a crying shame!’ I say, eyeing the poor fruit.

Sir Galahad follows my glance.

‘Have you been talking about those blessed apricots all this time?’ he asks, slowly.

I look at him, to see if the influx of business has turned his brain, but he seems sane enough.

‘Of course.’

‘Pshaw!’ he reiterates, as he strides off towards the house. I endeavour to keep pace, but my diminutive steps, and the additional weight of the basket, render my efforts vain, and I fall back some paces.

He looks round and strides back to me as fast as his long legs let him.

‘To think of my allowing you to carry this great basket!’ he says, penitently. ‘Don’t you think me a great brute, Pearl?’

The sunset is sending a bright gleam through his hair, and making it shine like burnished gold; on the whole, he is looking his best.

I shake my head like a mandarin in answer to his question.

‘Then, what *do* you think of me, Pearl?’ he whispers low.

But, low as it is, the whisper has so much feeling in it that it reaches to my very heart, and thrills through every pulse; and, with childish unreserve, I cry at once,—

‘I think there is no one like you in the world!’

Then it strikes me what an imbecile reply I have made, and I turn very red—as red as the big dahlia I make pretence to pluck.

‘As good or as bad?’ he whispers again, bending over; his hand touches mine, as he helps me to break the dahlia’s tough stalk, and it is as cold as ice, while his eyes seem to be twin sapphires by the soft shade of the dahlia-tree.

‘As good,’ I say, very little above my breath; but he hears me, for his lips part in a smile.

‘Is not Monsieur de Volnay better than I?’

‘Oh! *why* will you remind me of him?’ I exclaim angrily. ‘You bring in his name on purpose to torment me, I believe! Forget him!’

‘I cannot, Pearl.’

I do not ask why Bertrand should have such a tenacious hold on his memory, but I suppose my expression is inquisitive.

‘He lives in my remembrance day and night. Until I heard of him I envied no man in the wide, wide world!’

‘Envy him for what?’ I know it cannot be, because Bertrand is an especial favourite of mine, since I have told him the contrary scores of times.

‘I envy him for having all your love and trust!’

I remember my words, ‘*unter den Linden*.’ The sad story of Ananias and Sapphira flashes across my mind, and, conscience-struck, I resolve on confession, to obtain absolution.

‘I told a falsehood,’ I say, plainly and simply; but my naked eloquence has as much effect as all the flowers of rhetoric, for Sir Galahad’s face has caught the reflection of the dahlia now, and his eyes have changed from sapphires into stars.

‘Pearl, has *anyone* your love and trust?’

I don’t answer. There is no need to do so, for he seems to read something in my face. Ashamed—I don’t know why—I turn it away; but he takes it gently in both his hands, and studies it again. I feel my lashes droop over my hot cheeks. His eyes are shining down so now that mine dare not meet their burning light.

‘Child, you will make me impious enough to rebel against the Heaven that made my fate so adverse! If we had but met sooner I might have succeeded in—’

‘Coming to dinner to-day or not?’ Miss Græme says, sharply, as she emerges from behind a lauristinus, whose broad, glossy leaves have concealed her from our view.

My face drops away from Sir Galahad’s hands; there is nothing to show that we mind her appearance on the scene, save a flash of annoyance from under Sir Galahad’s lids, and just the smallest remnant of a blush on my face.

‘Just in time to save me,’ he mutters to himself. ‘We forgot the hour,’ he says out loud.

‘And your mother as well, who is vexed at your delay. You seemed to be examining the dahlias very intently, Robert. It is a new taste—floriculture,—is it not?’ says Miss Græme, in an unpleasant tone.

Sir Galahad is nettled.

‘No. I was always fond of flowers, Mimi; but I like the little modest ones. I was examining the dahlias to find out what possible merit flower-shows find in them, when their beauty is so loud and flaunty!’

She makes no reply, but turning quickly on her heel, she walks on, while we follow more slowly.

‘Pearl, there has been a coldness between you and me for some days. I was angry that night about Fleming, and said things which I might have left unsaid. Child, it is curious, but true, that my temper, which is usually even, I believe, is strangely liable to have its placidity disturbed by you! I find myself seeking for the motives of your conduct, cavilling at your most trivial shortcomings, as though, instead of liking you, a certain aversion to you lived in my mind, that made me look on your words and actions with a jaundiced eye. To err is human—to forgive divine. Take the adage to your heart, and let it pardon my unreasonableness—my irritability. Pardon and peace—my soul craves for them. Let me have them, Pearl; they will make me so much happier?’

‘And me too,’ I aver, in all truth, frankly meeting his pleading glance.

‘Can you put your hand into mine and feel that, in spite of everything, you can rely on me all your life?’

My small hand creeps into his larger one, and the two contentedly clasp one another for a minute.

‘Give me that dahlia as a proof that, if resentment against me at times has lived in your breast, in this moment it dies for ever.’

This is Mr Fleming over again, almost verbatim. The last flutter of Miss Græme’s trailing garments has disappeared from view. The shades of evening are falling fast, but, through the gloom, two blue eyes look greedily at the flower in my grasp, with more longing than it is worth. I hand it to Sir Galahad, and he presses a fervent kiss on its gorgeous petals.

‘You kiss it because it is large and gaudy, like Miss Græme,’ I laugh, saucily; but this time I know that it is the lips that are desecrated, and not the flower.

CHAPTER XIV

UNDER THE STARS.

‘ . . . How well
The night is made for tenderness, so still
That the low whisper, scarcely audible,
Is heard like music.’

‘CHILD, you will make me impious enough to rebel against the Heaven that has given me so adverse a fate! If we had but met sooner, I might have succeeded in—’

Eight days have flown by since these words slipped from Sir Galahad’s lips—when I say ‘slipped,’ I speak advisedly, for I feel that he never meant to utter them. Still they recur to me again and again, and at all hours of the day and night I torture my brain to find a sequel to the unfinished sentence. That he meant a regret that I was not free when we met, is what my heart would fain believe, yet *cui bono*? To me love is debarred, for my natural life-duty is to rule my conduct and my feelings—the small and narrow path of duty that must have no turning, no looking back or forward, the dull, weary plodding way in which even the wings of thought must be cut short, lest in unbridled sway it makes the wife of Bertrand de Volnay guilty in spirit, unfaithful in heart.

How blue my guardian’s eyes looked in the glow of the dying sun, and how strangely they shone down until they seemed to burn me with their light.

Will Bertrand’s glances ever thrill me like this even with duty to make them more potent? His eyes are perfect in shape and size—big, luminous, Spanish eyes, beaming with both fire and affection, but they utterly lack the *soul* that speaks in Sir Galahad’s.

The soft west wind is stealing into the room, and the lace curtains move slowly to and fro. The heliotrope and the Gloire de Dijon roses in the Sèvres vases send out a subtle intoxicating scent. The atmosphere breathes a warm and delicious languor which is pleasant to a child of the glorious south, and inert but content I sit with my fingers

clasped loosely, thinking that the nigger is wise in 'his' idea of paradise, his hat on his head and his hands in his pockets. I honour him for his indolence, for I love to dream away the summer hours, without even pretence of occupation near me. Crochet, needles, and knitting-pins, and the numerous petty but sharp weapons that feminine nature likes to handle, are dire abominations to my idle, good-for-nothing self. Miss Græme knows of my lazy proclivities, and says accordingly,—

'Robert, she has not a single womanly taste. All her ideas are peculiar and outlandish. She ought to be sent to a good finishing school, that her character may be properly moulded.' But Miss Græme has a domineering disposition that would like to have Dame Nature under her thumb as well as everyone else; and if she were consulted as regards the sexes, she would manage to be the only woman in the world herself.

'Pearl, come here. We are going to have tea outside, as the evening is so sultry,' Mrs Haviland calls to me through the window.

I am in no mood for the pleasures of gastronomy. To-day soul predominates over body entirely. I should like to dream on until the quiet gloaming comes and wraps me up in a great mantle of darkness down here, while stars one by one shine down and put me in mind of my guardian's eyes. I rise reluctantly to obey my call. The feast is spread under the wide branches of a gnarled old oak, and there are fruits and comestibles enough to gratify a *gourmet*. Mrs Haviland, in her rich black silk and white cap, sits at the head of the table, making tea. I take my place next to her, and then, and not till then, I see Sir Galahad and Miss Græme walking up and down on the broad path of the flowery wilderness. She wears a delicate sky-blue muslin, that suits her to a T; and her long golden hair hangs in wavelets down to her waist—a *coiffure à l'enfant*, which she has lately affected. Miss Græme is evidently excited on the subject under discussion—her usually faint colour is deepened to a bright pink flush, and her movements are more energetic than is their wont.

Sir Galahad's face wears an impassive aspect, which in some men might be reckoned to denote obstinacy, but which in him is firmness. His massive jaw is slightly set, and his

eyes do not scintillate as I have seen them, but look out straight, indifferent, and cold.

Petticoat government wins—I can see it. Miss Græme clasps her hands together ecstatically—an innocent gesture she has for displaying gratitude, and she beams up effulgently at him. I am glad when Mrs Haviland says,—‘Robert, your tea is getting cold.’

Cold tea is a refreshing and harmless beverage, but Sir Galahad likes it warm best, for he comes at once and seats himself opposite to me. Somehow since my awkwardness about the apricots I feel shy when I catch his glance. To make me more at my ease, Mrs Haviland remarks,—

‘How very much better Pearl is looking, is she not?’

If physical well-being consists in a superabundance of blood in one’s cheek, forehead, nose, and chin, I am robust to any extent at this moment, for she has called down a steady scrutiny from opposite, to which the broad daylight exposes me unmercifully. I make a feeble attempt at a smile, and, to hide my foolish nervousness, I assiduously set about the task of cutting a slice of bread and butter for myself, thick enough for a ploughboy.

‘Waste not, want not,’ is, I know, one of Mrs Haviland’s favourite axioms—not from illiberality, but from old-fashioned ways of speaking. Still I do not care to intrude on her notions. I stoop, on pretence of picking up my handkerchief, which I have purposely let fall, but in reality to discover if Snap or Dolly is under the table, so that I may surreptitiously share my monster hunch with them ; but the dogs are nowhere. Foiled in this, I glance covertly round, to mark if anyone present has noticed the sudden increase of my appetite, as well as the improvement in my health. Of course I have had a knack ever since I was a baby of being caught in any peccadillo I ventured upon. The blue eyes, brimful of laughter, have seen my dilemma.

‘Pearl, will you give me some bread and butter? I have hurt my hand, or I would not trouble you.’

‘Hurt your hand—how?’ Mrs Haviland inquires anxiously. The smallest prick of a pin on the stalwart limbs of her son would excite her maternal solicitude.

‘It is simply a bruise, which has not had time to show itself

yet ; but as Pearl is a good hand at cutting bread, I know she won't mind doing the needful.'

'Certainly,' I answer, with grave politeness, handing him the quarter of a quartern I have before me.

'She has helped you as she loves you,' Miss Græme sneers, in a tone which always flavours her voice with lime-juice whenever she talks to me or at me.

'Has she?'

Two common little words in the English language. To indifferent ears worth nothing, conveying nothing. On me they have the effect of accelerating every pulse in my frame.

Miss Græme eyes me curiously as Sir Galahad speaks, and I shrink visibly from her glance. Her ironical expression is unpleasant, but to mere looks retort courteous is impossible. So I bear in uncomfortable durance vile. Sir Galahad comes again to my rescue.

'It is the air of Glenthorn that has done Pearl good, mother ; but I am sorry to say that she will not have much more of it.'

I stare at him aghast, as pale now as I was ruddy before. Is he going to send me away anywhere? Perhaps to a finishing school, to follow out Miss Græme's suggestion! He catches my piteous look.

'Are you sorry to leave this, Pearl?'

Am I sorry to leave dear old Glenthorn—to leave *him*? Volumes could not tell my regret. So I only reply quietly,—

'Of course.'

The very presence of Miss Græme teaches me the art of reticence. I feel she is a wolf in sheep's clothing, and that some day she will catch me napping.

'But if the exchange is for London?'

'For London!' I exclaim.

'For London!' echoes Mrs Haviland. We are like the famous *trois poules*, that always followed suit.

'Yes ; Mimi, with her native eloquence, has persuaded me that the right thing to do is to go to town for a part of the season. She says we are all in danger of stagnation, with nothing to keep us company here but the roses and cabbages.'

Mrs Haviland looks glum, and puts down untasted her strawberries and cream, which she has been carefully manipu-

lating together for ten minutes. For the first time I detect a little irritation in her usually sweet voice.

‘We may be stagnating, but it is better to stagnate in comfort than to endure an existence of heat, dust, and noise.’

The Great Babylon has no attractions for her, neither has it for me. My impressions of it, as I saw it in a fog, are not agreeable ones, and heat, dust, and noise are not tempting. I hope in my heart that Miss Græme will be overruled; but my opinions of her tactics are pigmy—I shall get wiser anon. Mrs Haviland reads sympathy in the slight ethereal turn my nose has assumed since the subject has been mooted.

‘I am sure Pearl does not care about going,’ she says. As I said before, Mrs Haviland is one of those pliant, clinging natures that must have a support, or they succumb at once and get trodden down. She gives me an imploring look for help, to which I respond stoutly.

‘Not a bit do I care about going.’

Miss Græme examines me from head to foot superciliously, as though I were an ill weed that had grown apace, and was protruding my presence on the soil sacred to her tread; but the conviction that I am at this moment Mrs Haviland’s stay and staff enables me to put up with anything amiably.

‘Well, you can stay here if you like with Snap and Dolly, and Susanne can chaperon you, I suppose,’ Miss Græme murmurs, languidly.

I steal a look at my guardian, to try to discover what he thinks of this proposition, which is much more to my fancy than the metropolis. He is drinking a huge cup of tea, and he deliberately finishes it to the dregs before he replies,—

‘Perhaps you might ask Talbot’s sister, Mrs Leslie, to take you in for a fortnight or so. She has invited you before, and I dare say she will be glad to have you. And it would save our going.’

Miss Græme takes up the position of a martyr with exceeding *aplomb*. I think her anatomy is eccentric, and that she has a force-pump attached to her eyes, for she has a faculty of calling up tears whenever she requires them as auxiliaries. Her great hazel eyes are turned up like those of a devotee, and she has a ‘put upon’ attitude.

‘No, I would rather not go without you and dear auntie. Of course I can give it up—but you know you promised.’

A shade of perplexed annoyance passes over Sir Galahad’s features; he has promised, and he never breaks his word. Mrs Haviland knows this.

‘If Robert promised you, he must keep to it. The move is certainly very distasteful to me, but still I will go.’

What does Miss Græme care to whom the move is unpleasant, as long as she is satisfied. She is up in the clouds, with a beatific smile on her full red lips, and, if the truth must be known, there are visions of balls, and gorgeous dresses, and a whole army of admirers parading before her mind’s eye. She only wakes up when Mrs Haviland asks, in a resigned tone,—

‘And when do you purpose going, Robert?’

‘Next week—say Tuesday.’

‘Pearl, the heat has tired me, but if you would not mind a walk, there are a few things for Mrs Wood.’

Mrs Haviland is standing at the head of the table, preparatory to going into the house. She is the Lady Bountiful of the village of Glenthorn, that lies on a slope hard by, and among the favourite recipients of her bounty Widow Wood is the greatest.

I give a willing assent. The sun has nearly gone down, and taken up the undignified aspect of a huge blubber ball, just behind the old pine trees. The air is balmy with the breath of the flowers. The birds are twittering out their last good nights on the branches overhead, and a large yellow butterfly, deserted by his kind, stretches his languid wings on the fragrant head of a deep-hued carnation close to where I sit.

‘Wait a moment. I’ll send out the parcel,’ Mrs Haviland says. Miss Græme floats away out of sight, but Sir Galahad still sits opposite me, silent, and a little sulky, to my thinking. He is employed in rather an unequal contest between a large stone and his ivory-knobbed cane. The contest results according to my expectations. The last round sends the ivory knob flying in shivers, while the stone stares up hard and immovable in its old quarters. My guardian meets my amused face, and smiles. The vials of his wrath

are expended at the cost of a guinea, and he has regained his equanimity.

‘I’ll go with you part of the way, Pearl,’ he volunteers.

I am very glad, but I don’t say so. I only rush off in double quick haste to don my prettiest straw hat, which has a white rose peeping out coquettishly from a nest of tulle, and to coax one or two curls into order that refractorily stick out the wrong way. In a second I am on the lawn again. Sir Galahad, armed with a basket of fresh eggs, and a bunch or two of lovely purple grapes, awaits me, and we start. We go down the great broad road that leads from the house on to a long winding lane, with high hedges covered with tangles of sweet briar and wild honeysuckle. The walk is delicious. The ball of conversation is at a standstill. It is an evening for dreaming, and not for talking. Sir Galahad stalks along like Hamlet’s ghost (only more substantial) by my side, and I am wondering to myself if the atmosphere which *his* head reaches is cooler than the one I enjoy.

‘Oh!’ he exclaims at last, as he comes to a dead halt.

‘What is it?’ I inquire, anxiously, fearing he is ill.

‘Nothing; only we are not running a race, are we?’

Men are unreasonable creatures. I am quite aware that from the time we started I have had a difficulty in keeping up with the pace my companion chose to walk; but I am in one of my happy moods, and I do not attempt to recriminate. We have reached Mrs Wood’s cottage, and I deliver the comestibles, and receive her reiterated thanks. Sir Galahad is leaning against a tall post just outside the garden gate, in a brown study, viciously pulling the ends of his long brown moustache; and I am close to him before he sees me. We trot back homewards as we came, until we are half way.

‘Take my arm—you must be tired,’ he says, gently.

I slip my hand through his arm, and give a side look up at him. He is looking down on me, with a soft smile on his face. ‘What a little bit of a thing you are,’ is the result of his inspection.

My dignity of five feet three inches is offended.

‘You only like big women like Miss Græme,’ I say, crossly.

'*Ne quid nimis*,' he laughs.

I had learnt little smatterings of Latin from papa, and I laugh too.

'Pearl, just see, you only reach as far as this,' and he points to a particular little square in his checked tweed suit.

I do not agree. I know I am taller than that. He remarks the doubtful expression on my countenance.

'I'll bet you a dozen pair of gloves against one of these great long curls,' he says, taking up my hair as tenderly as if it was only mine by right of purchase, 'that I am right.'

'Let us measure,' I say, defiantly.

We stand still under the light of a myriad of stars. I certainly reach above the point he indicated.

'I have won my gloves!' I cry, triumphantly clapping my hands.

'Let us measure again,' he whispers, very low, though there are none to hear him but the sleepy birds.

I obey, and just for one moment my head rests upon his heart. I can hear it beat, and Sir Galahad's breath comes hard. The next instant he pushes me gently away, and in a silence which neither of us cares to break, we resume our walk. The lodge at Glenthorn is in sight when he speaks again.

'Why do you dislike going to London, Pearl? Most girls would be enchanted with the prospect of society, and all the pleasures it brings in its train.'

'I suppose I am not like other girls; perhaps it's owing to my "promiscuous" bringing up,' I answer, deprecatingly, thinking of Miss Græme's words. I am sorry he should think me uncultured and unsociable; but I console myself with the thought that, at any rate, I am truthful. I believe he remembers the word, for he champs away again at his moustache to hide a smile. 'And I love Glenthorn too much to wish to leave it,' I add, from the depths of my soul. 'I seem to have grown familiar with every tree and flower and bird, and then—' I turn away, ashamed of the glistening drops gratitude has brought to my eyes—'I have had such kindness I add.

He cannot see my tears, but he can hear my voice shake a little, I suppose, for his quivers in sympathy when he says softly,—

‘Who could help being kind to you, little one?’

My thoughts fly off to Miss Græme, but somehow her likes or dislikes seem too trivial to allude to in this moment when my heart is full of the goodness of Mrs Haviland and Sir Galahad. I only cling, involuntarily, more closely to his arm. The evening gloam wraps me in darkness, but, instead of gazing up at the stars that spangle the heavens, I look into Sir Galahad’s face, and even while I shiver under the expression of his eyes I feel a strange and exquisite pleasure. He draws the hand that lies on his arm nearer to him.

‘What shall I do when I lose you, Pearl?’ he asks, in a broken whisper.

I cannot reply, for I know I shall cry; at the bare thought the tears are already at the surface. ‘What shall I do?’ I say to myself. God only knows! When I go away from Glen-thorn I shall leave everything behind—hope, happiness, and strength. There will be nothing left to look forward to, except a quiet grave beside papa in the old *cimetière* at La Roche.

‘It is wrong, dishonourable, everything that’s bad, in fact, but I can’t help it,’ he bursts out, passionately; ‘there is something I *must* know—my very soul thirsts for it. Pearl, if you had been free could you have loved me?’

He has seized my two hands firmly, and is looking in my face with unflinching eyes. I do not try to free my hands from his hard grasp. Would to God I could stay in it for ever; but my spirit quails with fear for my ‘future’ after this. I never knew how madly I loved him till now. I have never attempted to analyse my feelings for him, even in a question to myself. But now that *he* asks me, I can tell no lie; in this moment my childhood and my girlhood seem to have drifted far behind, leaving me a woman, with a woman’s depth of love.

I turn up my face in the starlight. I know that my lips are hot and quivering with the fire that burns in my heart. I look straight into his eyes, and my soul speaks in spite of me, loudly and clearly,—

‘I love you *now*!—I shall love you for ever and ever!’

He catches me in his arms and strains me to him. I hear his heart beating more wildly than before, while I feel his

kisses on my brow, and cheeks, and hands, but he does not touch my lips. Then he releases me, and, faint and trembling in every limb, I walk back by myself to the house. I reach my own room, and my eyes fall on my hand, the emerald hoop is missing. I have lost it!

CHAPTER XV

SEE-SAW! MARGERY DAW.

‘What man so wise, what earthly wit so rare,
As to descry the crafty cunning train
By which Deceit doth mask in visor fair,
And seem like Truth, whose shape she well can feign.’

‘OH! my dear sir, don’t you find that nine parts in ten of the world are of no use but to make you wish yourself with that tenth part? I am so far from growing used to mankind by living amongst them that my natural ferocity and wildness do but every day grow worse—they tire me, they fatigue me; I don’t know what to do with them. I don’t know what to say to them; I fling open the window and fancy I want air, and when I get by myself I undress myself and seem to have had people in my pockets, in my pleats, on my shoulders! I literally seem to have murdered a man whose name was Ennui, for his ghost is ever before me! They say there is no English word for Ennui. I think you may translate it most literally by what is called “entertaining people,” and doing the honours.’ This is what one of papa’s favourites, Horace Walpole, says. He embodies my sentiments exactly.

To Miss Græme, London is a paradise; to me, it is purgatory, in which my fettered spirits ‘linger in purgatorial pain.’ Window corners have always been weaknesses of mine, and I have taken up my station in one now, that belongs to a fine house situated in the heart of aristocratic May Fair.

Perched on the sill, clad in black, I look like a little crow eyeing the gaudy-plumaged birds that are on the

wing for the parks; but instead of envying them, I philosophise. The 'world' has no attractions for my rustic mind. It and I don't assimilate. I am as a blot of ink dropped accidentally on its fair surface, and if anyone was good enough to wipe me off I should be thankful, for I feel dreadfully out of place. Sometimes I think that, if my feelings were in a less chaotic condition, I might enjoy myself more; but, since that evening when my guardian taught me to know myself, I have lost my mental equilibrium altogether.

'See-saw, Margery Daw,' are the words that best express the changing states of my internal sentiments.

'Still there, child? you'll take root on that window-sill soon!' Miss Græme remarks, flippantly, as she walks into the drawing-room. She is standing before a big mantel-glass, administering finishing touches to her toilette for a grand flower-show.

A diaphanous bonnet, like a tiny white cloud, rests daintily on the golden glory of her hair. A silk dress, of that tender hue yclept sea foam, fitting like wax, displays her fully developed figure to perfection. She has sea-foam gloves, and sea-foam parasol to match.

'Where's Robert?' she asks, curtly.

'How should I know? I am not Mr Haviland's keeper,' I answer, irreverently, infusing as much *sang-froid* as I can in my tone.

She leaves off staring at herself, to stare at me instead. 'Humph!' she says, meaningly, with a sinister smile curling her lip, and a stagy cough that sounds suggestive.

I gaze at her with wide-open, surprised eyes.

'You are not, but you would like to be. I am not quite as blind as a mole, child!'

For the first time in my life I think frankness a vice and hypocrisy a virtue, and I wish myself a hardened woman of the world, to whom blushes and palpitations are things unknown or forgotten. The hot blood surges up into my face, and my heart beats. Miss Græme's cruel eyes are fixed on me, and her feline propensities are gratified by the sight of my painful embarrassment. She leaves her position on the hearthrug, and walks up to me. One finger of a sea-foam glove touches my shoulder, and I shrink away from it as if it was the Old Man of the Sea.'

‘Little birds should not fly too high, or they may come to grief,’ she informs me, with extreme unction.

‘Please don’t talk metaphor—I don’t understand it,’ I reply, trying to show as little irritation as possible.

‘Innocent little Pearl! I will try to suit my discourse to your comprehension then. Robert Haviland, though a rich man, is not a marrying man—moreover, his taste does not lie among what Byron calls bread-and-butter misses. Remember your catechism, child, and rest content with the station of life to which it has pleased Heaven to call you, otherwise be satisfied with Monsieur de Volnay for a husband.’

I boil over with indignation at her insulting words, and she stands before me a great stolid mass, without a ruffle on her fair white brow, as she stabs me slowly and deliberately by her suspicions and innuendoes.

‘I *am* satisfied with Monsieur de Volnay—quite satisfied, and I willingly leave to you the owner of Glenthorn and his riches—I want none of them!’ I burst out passionately.

My guardian hears me—he has entered the room quietly, in the very heat of the discussion, and as I come to the end of my violent repudiation of him I meet his gaze. The fire is quenched at once in my eyes. I grow cold all over, as if a mortal sickness had seized me. He does not speak, but I can read worlds of wounded feeling, disappointment, and sorrow on his features. I repent at once all I have uttered, and, if Miss Græme were not by, I would crave his forgiveness humbly; but her presence wraps me in an armour of pride and reserve. He does not know the amount of provocation I have had, or he would not look so reproachfully at me. He turns away—not angrily or impatiently, but sadly, and takes up his hat.

‘Come, Mimi, it is full time we were gone.’

In another instant the carriage has taken them out of sight. Mrs Haviland is out for the day, and I am alone in my glory—glory—alas! like the tribe of Israel, I may say, ‘Ichabod! Ichabod!’—the glory hath departed. I get up from the window-sill, and creep into a corner of a capacious lounge. I am again Mariana of the Moated Grange, but my puny cries for death do not reach the sky. The afternoon drags along. In fancy I see Sir Galahad and Miss Græme

at the flower-show ; and I hate flowers as much as I liked them before, for they are the cause of his absence. If he only knew how contrite I am, he would forget my bitter words.

A poor little waif, I am tossed on the ocean of life, with no hand to guide me through the rocks and shoals ; rudderless, I shall drift, drift—where ? Oh, my God ! my haven will be Bertrand de Volnay's home ! I bury my head deep in the cushion, and revel in misery ! At last, a loud rat-tat rouses me. I rush to the window, and peep out from behind the curtain. It is they. Sir Galahad is looking up, and his face is pale and weary, while he walks into the house with a slow and listless step. Before they are up the stairs I run up with a tread that is as light as a feather into my own room, and double-lock the door.

Seven o'clock finds my eyelids swollen quite out of the line of beauty and proportion, and my cheeks flushed and stained. One glance at the mirror is decisive—I cannot face the dinner. I send down a message that I am suffering from headache, and should be glad to remain quiet for the evening. Susanne returns in a little while armed with a silver tray, with tea and cream, and a bunch of luscious hot-house grapes nestling in a cool green vine-leaf, and Mrs Haviland's love, and hopes that I shall soon be better.

'Mais c'est Monsieur qui a envoyé ceci,' she adds, pointing to the tray. I drink off the souchong, and it tastes like the nectar of Jove, and I demolish the fruit to the very last grape, for *he* has sent them up.

Presently a longing for fresh air seizes me. The parks lie close by ; impulsive as ever, I bid Susanne accompany me, and donning my hat and a thick veil, we sally down the back stairs, and are out of the house without any witnesses to our escapade.

The evening is soft and warm. It is growing dusk, and but few pedestrians are abroad, so I fling back my veil to catch the little breeze that scarcely rustles the leaves on the trees.

We take the broad walk that leads from Grosvenor Gate to Hyde Park Gate, when we come face to face with Mr Fleming. He starts visibly as he recognises me. It is the first time we have met since Sir Galahad gave him his *congé*.

I hope that he will pass on with a bow; no such thing. Bashfulness is not a manly virtue, especially in London, and in spite of the past he deliberately turns and paces along by my side. We are virtually alone, as it were, for Susanne does not understand a word of English.

‘Miss Cathcart, you behaved very ill to me,’ he begins; and I cannot laugh, for there is a touch of genuine pathos in his tones. ‘I spoke to Haviland, as you desired me, and he said you were engaged to someone whom you loved, and bade me not see you again. Of course I guessed at once that the someone was himself.’

The changes are ringing always on the same theme—Sir Galahad and I. First Miss Græme, now Mr Fleming. ‘What everyone says *must* be true,’ is an old adage—the present illustration proves how fallacious those hackneyed old saws are.

‘What could have made you fancy it was Mr Haviland to whom I was engaged?’ I ask; and I cannot quite control a little tremor in my voice as I speak his name.

‘Well, if I had not been a blind fool, I should have noticed a lot of things myself; as it was, they were pointed out to me.’

‘Pointed out? By whom?’

He changes colour, and looks uncomfortable.

‘I would rather not tell. It can do no good, and it may make mischief.’

‘Very well—just as you like,’ I answer, in a dignified tone, looking at him with wrathful eyes.

‘I don’t care to vex you,’ he says, piteously, like a contrite schoolboy. ‘If I mention names it will go no further?’

‘No.’

‘It was Miss Græme, the day after our moonlight walk, when I did not see you at all. She said my suit was hopeless, since I was poor, and you were over head and ears in love with the *wealthy* master of Glenthorn. You are very young to be so worldly, Miss Cathcart!’

I don’t heed his opinion of me. I might have known it was the beautiful *anguis in herbâ* who had poisoned Mr Fleming’s mind against me. The point she is driving at is to insinuate to everyone that I am *interested*—that the *wealthy* master of Glenthorn is my aim! She will insinuate the same to my guardian himself! I think of St Paul to keep me from

hating her—'Charity suffereth long, and is kind, is not easily provoked, beareth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.' But charity is easier to preach than to practise. I remember the frank confession that my *soul* made through my lips, under the stars, and I blush crimson as the thought strikes me that he may believe that avowal was but part and parcel of my mercenary plot to secure the 'best match in the county,' as Mrs Haviland called him. Sir Galahad, my love, my king, with whom I would rather share the driest crust than 'wear the crown the Bourbon lost!'

'See how you are blushing now at the very mention of Haviland's name! Oh! Miss Cathcart, if it had been my fate to have met you long ago, to have made you love me, as I know you *can* love, what a happy fellow I should be!'

Mr Fleming's rhapsodies fall harmlessly on my ear. Every delicate feeling I possess is up in arms, a horrible civil war rages within my breast. What if I *do* love Sir Galahad? If, in spite of me, he is my life, need I wear my heart on my sleeve for daws to peck at?

'Mr Fleming,' I say, gravely, 'you are quite wrong in your suppositions. Mr Haviland was my father's friend; he is good to me, and I like him, but that is all.'

Twice in the space of twelve hours I have denied all affection for Sir Galahad. How can I do it? I wonder that the wraith of my heart's love does not rise up to upbraid me for so strenuously denying its existence. My companion does not dream that there can be anyone else in some corner of the globe to whom my faith may be pledged. Bertrand de Volnay is evidently a myth as far as he is concerned. Miss Græme has been reticent about him from diplomacy. It is enough for Mr Fleming that Sir Galahad is not his rival.

'Then you are free! What could Haviland have been thinking of? And here I have been making myself miserable for weeks past; for I have not forgotten you, not for one moment, Pearl!' he exclaims, with sparkling eyes and a bright face, and he draws my hand unceremoniously through his arm, and firmly keeps it; and in this way we pace up and down, while I, absorbed in my own painful reflections, never so much as recollect the encouragement I am giving him.

The clock near Hyde Park Gate strikes nine, and recalls me to the present.

'We must go home. It is late, and poor old Susanne looks woefully tired,' I say, as I glance at my chaperon, who trudges along wearily at my side.

'Not yet!' my suitor whispers, in an *empresé* manner. 'This is the first time we have been really alone—in a way!'

Quite true. The park is almost empty. The shades of evening are falling fast, and Mr Fleming and I—Pearl Cathcart, with my hand pledged to Bertrand de Volnay, and my love avowed to Sir Galahad—are linked together lovingly, like Paul and Virginia.

'Pearl!' he evidently has a partiality for the name, and speaks it so often that it offends my ear, 'I am a very strange fellow. When I *will* a thing I always arrive at it, and I am determined to make you love me!' he cries, with a lofty air, as if he was playing Julius Cæsar, or Canute, or some other self-sufficient individual. I smile to myself as I steal a side glance at him; he looks such a Lilliputian by my stalwart Gulliver, that the notion of his making me care about him is too absurd. I try to crush the gigantic effort in the bud.

'It is not worth your while,' I commence; but he stops me, having taken my 'put-him-down' beginning for an attempt at self-depreciation on my part.

'Not worth my while! Why, you are the loveliest, most lovable little thing in the world! You are worth anyone's while!'

Since my classification among 'bread-and-butter misses' by Miss Græme, I have fallen considerably in my own estimation, and Mr Fleming's laudatory speech helps to pull me up again. I listen complacently. Praise is the greatest emollient for wounded vanity, and I am loth to deprive myself of it.

'Let me call in Curzon Street to-morrow afternoon at three—do! I should like to show Miss Græme how little I believe in her.'

I assent at once. Mr Fleming is no Jesuit, his intellect is too common-place for chicanery, but he could not have resorted to a more persuasive argument. It is soothing to think that Miss Græme will see someone more devoted to me than to herself. Mr Fleming's devotion will be an incense to

my pride, even though I become a holocaust on the altar of boredom.

With the promise of seeing him on the morrow, he lets me turn homewards, and wishes me good-night near the door. I ring as the hour of ten chimes in the hall. Susanne and I pass quietly up the stairs, and once in my room, I throw off my hat and veil and sit down to think.

A gentle knock, which I recognise as Mrs Haviland's, makes me jump up and thrust my hat out of sight. My guilty conscience expects a homily on the impropriety of nocturnal promenades. She comes in a little grave.

'Pearl, I was up here about an hour ago—Robert sent me to see how you were—he seemed very anxious about you.'

She does not add that she found the bird flown ; and the whole brunt of confession falls on my shoulders.

'I went out with Susanne for a little while—I thought the air might do my head good,' I say, deprecatingly.

'If you had let us know, Robert would gladly have taken you. London is not Glenthorn. Young girls cannot venture out with impunity here,' she remarks, with a sigh, which may be from a philanthropic feeling of regret at the immorality of the metropolis, or for my deplorable ignorance of the *convenances*. 'You must have a gentleman to take care of you in the evening—Susanne, good old soul, is not sufficient protector.'

I *had* a gentleman to take care of me, but something keeps me from avowing the fact. I don't fancy it is deceit, but a sort of suspicion that after Mr Fleming's proposal I, as an affianced young person, should not have allowed any further advances on my part.

Mrs Haviland sees contrition plainly inscribed on my features, and she relents at once. Her mouth softens into a gentle smile as she says,—

'Well, never mind, Pearl dear. No great harm can accrue from this once, so long as you avoid doing these things for the future. I was only sorry to see Robert so vexed before he went out.'

'Did Mr Haviland go to his club early?' I venture to inquire, in the hope that he is in ignorance of the hour at which I came back from ravening wolves to the safe sanctuary of the house.

‘He did not go to the club, but to look for you. I wonder you did not see him, for he returned a moment after you—in fact, it was from him I heard you had come in, as I did not hear you knock.’

I wince. I knew that a feeble little pull at the bell was all I gave as a sign of myself at the door. I wonder if Sir Galahad saw me with Mr Fleming. The thought makes me uncomfortable, and I long to try and discover whether he did or not.’

‘You had better come down for a little while—a glass of wine and water will do you good, Pearl.’

‘Yes, I think I will,’ I answer, languidly; but there is no languor about me in reality—I am all on the alert to see Sir Galahad.

I go down in a few minutes, and enter the drawing-room with a slow step. I am really pale from the effects of crying in the afternoon, and I have only the quarter of an eye visible, the whole of one and three-quarters of the other being hidden by my pocket handkerchief, as if to ward off the glare of the lights, for in reality I am a craven, and cannot bear to encounter a glance from a pair of keen blue eyes.

Sir Galahad is reading at the table, with his book upside down, and the characters like Assyrian hieroglyphics. He glances up as I walk in, and rising, he draws an easy-chair close to the open window and places a tabouret before it. Then he returns to his difficult literary occupation without a word. My heart beats fast as I slide into the chair. The attention is pleasant, but the manner of rendering it is decidedly ominous. He *has* seen me with Mr Fleming.

Mrs Haviland, worn out with her day’s visit, sleeps quietly and soundly on the sofa, and Miss Græme is gone to the opera with Mr Talbot and his sister. Thus Sir Galahad and I have it all to ourselves—although, in reality, he might be in Timbuctoo, and I in Iceland, for the dreadful ‘distance’ that seems between us. I love each tone of his voice, but I dread to hear it now.

The leaves of his book rustle quickly; then he shuts it up and thrusts it aside. In another moment he is occupying my pet corner in the window. The gleam of the gas-lamps outside fall across his face. It is not only white and sad, but

stern. My eyes begin dissecting feature by feature, from the broad, open brow to the strong, firm lines round the mouth ; and in my study the events of the day slip out of my memory. He brings them back to me in double quick haste.

‘ You sent down a message to say you were ill—directly after you go out for a walk—not openly, but surreptitiously ! This is rather strange of you, Pearl, is it not ? ’

By which speech he means to suggest that I have acted deceitfully, deliberately, and with premeditation.

‘ I don’t see what there is strange in seeking a remedy for a headache, if one has one,’ I answer, a little doggedly. I do not feel stubborn in the least, but I resort to an aggrieved sort of tone to avoid ‘ blame,’ which, from *his* lips, I cannot bear. ‘ Besides, Susanne was with me, and it was all right ! ’ I add, glibly ; but I have thrown out a feeler, and I await the result with anxiety.

‘ No, Pearl, it was all wrong ! ’ Sir Galahad says sternly, like a modern Lysurgus. ‘ Suspicion is a foul thing to enter a man’s soul, and God knows I am the last to admit it without cause ; but appearances are strongly against you ! Had you no ulterior motive for going out this evening ? Are you quite sure it was only for the benefit of your head ? ’

I am silent. My heart swells high, high, even to bursting, with a sense of injustice ; but I am too proud to defend myself against his inference that I have been guilty of a clandestine meeting—of a cunning from which my nature revolts. Silence condemns me in his eyes.

‘ You don’t answer, Pearl. And could you act like this after all that has passed ? Do you remember what you said to me at Glenthorn but a fortnight back, when you stood with your hands in mine, and your face upturned to Heaven, by my side ? ’

I remember only too well ; while I live nothing will erase the memory of it from my mind. His words have opened the sluice-gates of tenderness ; but I sit still and passive, though my heart burns for him—yearns for him ! The very coldness of my attitude seems to lash him to greater passion, for he leans forward on the sill towards me till his face nearly touches mine, and whispers, feverishly,—

‘ What have I done to you that you should hurt me so ? ’

This afternoon I heard you utter words that cut me to the soul—this evening you keep an appointment with another man. Pearl, you will drive me mad!’

I am angry. What have *I* done that he should believe me capable of assignations with anyone? I turn away impatiently, and he accepts the gesture for an acknowledgment of my fault.

‘Mimi has often told me that your liking for me is not sincere, but I have fondly thought she was mistaken. I suppose hope was father to my thought,’ he says, sadly.

Her name is cypress leaves in the cup I have to swallow.

‘You can believe *all* Miss Græme tells you, Mr Haviland. She is your oracle in everything, and far be it from me to depreciate her worthiness and judgment!’ I exclaim, defiantly, in a voice which rings hard and metallic to myself. The green-eyed monster is tearing me to pieces, but like the brave Spartan I will endure the agony without giving a visible sign. ‘But in justice to myself, I must tell you one thing, which is, that your accusation of an appointment with Mr Fleming is false,’ I add, proudly.

His face lights up like a sunbeam.

‘Then you did not make an appointment with him!’

My countenance falls. I suddenly recollect the morrow, when through pique, and pique alone, I allowed myself to be drawn into a promise to see him.

‘I met Mr Fleming only by accident this evening, and he said he might perhaps—that he would call here to-morrow,’ I stammer out.

‘And you consented to see him?’

His tone makes me quake.

‘Yes—why not?’

‘Why not!—ask your own heart why not. Mr Fleming wishes to marry you, and has told you so; with this knowledge you encourage his attentions—you must be either a contemptible coquette, or else—you *have* forgotten Monsieur de Volnay!’

I *have* forgotten Bertrand,’ I murmur, involuntarily.

My thoughts are gone back again to the evening when Sir Galahad’s lips were pressed to my face. I look at them now; there is no tenderness or softness about them, they are

set closely together. To bring a smile to them—the smile I love, the smile that makes his face so beautiful—I would sacrifice all the pride that is in my heart.

‘You are cruel to me, Mr Haviland ; you are ready to misjudge me always. You see with Miss Græme’s eyes, and they are none of the kindest !’ my voice shakes, but I can’t steady it.

‘Mimi is not unkindly disposed towards you ; she has told me so a score of times. Your dislike to her is another thing that troubles me. I should have wished you to get on well together, since her home must be always in Glenthorn.’

It is true, then, what Mr Fleming told me about his marrying her at some future day ; he has been trifling with me, playing with me—he has spoken words that have made my cheek glow and my frame thrill, simply because he knew he was safe—that both he and I were bound !

‘I am sorry to vex you,’ I reply, frigidly, ‘but I and Miss Græme could never get on well together ; we are antagonistic in every taste and feeling. Her home may be always in Glenthorn, but fortunately I shall be out of the way of meeting her ! Listen to me, Mr Haviland—I would rather marry Mr Fleming, or anyone else, than live the life of a hypocrite, and pretend liking when I don’t feel it, although Miss Graeme does consider me of so *interested* a disposition !’

The words rattle out vehemently, and he misunderstands them. All that I have said in relation to Miss Græme he has taken to himself. He turns as white as death, and his eyes dilate as he looks at me.

‘Fickle,’ he says, ‘and not worth a man’s love. Pearl, you have spoken your mind at last—never again by word or deed shall I interfere in anything you choose to do or say. For the future go your own way, and fear neither anger nor reproach from me.’

With this he walks straight out of the room, and I watch his receding figure with loving gaze. I have fairly overreached myself—I have fallen from my stilts, and am planted without a friend in this big howling wilderness, as Mr Fleming calls it. No matter !—if love lies bleeding, pride still rears its crest. I have surely disabused Sir Galahad of any idea that his coffers have any temptation for me. There was a

time when I wanted riches to go round the world, but the portion of it which I have seen already is so unalluring that I have no inclination for further research. I would live and die at Glenthorn right willingly, so long as Miss Græme was not there to watch my last throes with her hazel eyes.

I stalk up majestically to my bedroom, in case Sir Galahad may spy me on the stairs ; but once inside, off goes my steel armour, and, like a crushed reed, I lie white and limp. Sir Galahad's last words have had the cheerful effect of making this day one of the darkest in my calendar. The day after to-morrow is my birthday. What will the new year I am entering on bring forth ? I rise quickly, and rush to the cupboard in which my hat is deposited, and breaking off a 'marguerite,' I commence, German fashion, to pluck off its petals. For the charm to be efficacious, the flower should not be artificial, but *faute de mieux*. I go on wrenching—'Happiness,' 'misery,' 'happiness,' 'misery,' until the last—'happiness'—the wreck falls from my hands, and I lie down more hopefully. In a little while I fall asleep, with Sir Galahad's face before me.

CHAPTER XVI.

POUDRE AUX YEUX.

'The tinsel glitter and the specious mien
Delude the most—few pry behind the scene.'

My guardian knew human nature well when he said that coquetry was as indigenous in woman's nature as oaks to British soil.

It is three P.M. The June sun is shining fiercely bright, but its fervent beams are excluded from the drawing-room in Curzon Street, by a carefully-lowered marquise, beneath whose friendly shade flourish in beauty and luxuriance scarlet geraniums, aromatic nasturtiums, and gossamer - petalled azaleas. In the artistic *demi-jour* light, Miss Græme looks more lovely. It mellows her almost too dazzling tints of pink and pearl, and deepens the pupils of her hazel eyes. In

virgin white, with just a broad violet ribbon gleaming up from the masses of her fair hair, she lounges indolently in a velvet fauteuil, with her feet encased in silver-braided brodequins, a new importation from the Palais Royal, resting on a velvet hassock; and in her hand is a monster fan, composed of peacocks' feathers, from which a row of hard yellow eyes stare out. This fan she flirts in a manner truly Spanish, in a succession of flutters—that Addison calls the modest flutter, the timorous flutter, the angry flutter, and the amorous flutter. Facing her is her *soi-disant* admirer, Mr Talbot, apparently *plus épris que jamais*, for his gaze rests immovably on her as she carries on a *sotto voce* conversation with him.

Mrs Haviland is absorbed at a window in the intricacies of a crochet pattern in the *Queen* newspaper that lies before her, and Doctor Rowe, who has run up to town on a flying visit, sits near her, with his glasses perched on his impertinent nose, studying to-day's *Post*. I am in my usual sable garb, with a superb rose, one of the Gloire de Dijon species, for which Glenthorn is famous, and which the doctor has brought me, stuck in my bodice. On my knee lies a book of new engravings, which I look at through a sort of mental fog, which transforms trees into chimneys, and *vice-versa*. Mr Fleming has placed himself in as close proximity as possible, and every now and then, as though accidentally, his hand touches mine as we turn over the pictures. I draw mine away with a jerk, but he does not seem to notice the gesture. His face is without a cloud, and he has an all-conquering air about him, as though he had already assumed partially the sceptre of government in the region of my heart. I wonder what Sir Galahad thinks of the effective tableau in the serio-comedy played this June afternoon? He is away in the farthest corner of the room, leaning over a table, and to all appearance immersed in a voluminous correspondence, but the ink in his pen must be dry, judging from the interval that has occurred since he last used it, and his eyes are turned this way.

'Did they know we met last night?' whispers Mr Fleming.

'Yes, Mr Haviland saw us,' I answer back in the same tone.

'Did he really? By Jove! Was he angry?'

'He has not the right to be angry with me,' I say, disdainfully, to carry out my scheme for throwing dust in his eyes,

and in my zealous desire to do so I lose sight of discretion and speak too loud. 'If he *was* angry it would not matter to me!'

Miss Græme has descended to listening. Her *pattes de velours* creep out at once to scratch.

'Complimentary to Robert, upon my word!' she cries, spitefully. 'Robert, here is high treason, you should quell it at once by a proper exercise of guardianly authority.'

Sir Galahad turns red.

'I do not care for authority. Besides, Miss Cathcart is beyond leading-strings. Iron rule is not to my taste either.'

'The flowery chain of love is much nicer, isn't it, Haviland?' Mr Talbot lisps, affectedly, throwing a tender glance at Miss Græme, which she covertly renders back behind the fan, accompanied by an amorous flutter.

'Perhaps *you* may think so! For my part, I am an infidel in sentiment; it is pinchbeck as a rule, and as false as women,' Sir Galahad asserts, with a quick glance at me.

'Then you are really a misogynist, Haviland! I did not believe it,' says Mr Fleming.

'No, no, Robert is no woman-hater, *I* know,' Miss Græme breaks in decidedly. 'He may be hard to please, even fastidious, if you will, but he *can* care very much, if he likes, for a person, can't he?' she says, with an appealing glance at her cousin, to which he makes no response. His eyes have a far-off, softened look in them, but I shake off the glamour they cast over me, and deliver myself up body and soul to the hydra-headed monster jealousy again. Miss Græme knows that he can care, of course! She and he understand one another. I stoop over the engravings with renewed zeal, and Mr Fleming takes the initiative, and does likewise, so that his brown head presents a close contrast to my black one.

'This is a funny-looking lighthouse,' I say, but I cannot keep my glance from being erratic.

'It is the leaning tower of Pisa,' Mr Fleming informs me, with a grave face. I laugh and shut the book. All the towers in the world don't interest me at this moment, and they all look upside down.

I turn to a topic that interests me, more especially to-day, when I am 'all forlorn,' like the maid who milked the cow with the crumpled horn.

‘You know a relation of mine, Mr Fleming?’

‘Jack Temple, do you mean?’

‘Yes. I have never seen him. What is he like? For, you know, I am so isolated in the world that a relation is a natural curiosity to me,’ I say, with pathos.

‘Jack is an excellent fellow. I’ll bring him here, if you like.’

‘Oh, will you!’ I exclaim. A real flesh and blood relation is too much for me. I flush, and grow excited. ‘But perhaps he won’t come,’ I add, mournfully, as visions of uncousinly obduracy present themselves.

‘I should just think he would, indeed! Everyone hasn’t got such a cousin as you. I only wish I was he to have his privileges,’ he whispers very low, in a confidential tone, while his glances are more fervent than his words.

I crimson again, but I am too full of meeting Jack Temple—someone belonging to me—belonging to papa—to heed the appearances we make before the rest of the party.

‘When will you come?’

‘To-morrow, about three.’

‘Very well; I shall expect you without fail;’ and my voice is unconsciously louder. Sir Galahad pushes back his chair with a violence that is unusual to him, and walks across the room to where his mother sits, and says something in her ear. I have risen—so has Mr Fleming, who is looking for his hat preparatory to departure.

‘If you are disengaged, you had better give us the pleasure of dining with us?’ Mrs Haviland asks, in her old-fashioned, courteous manner.

He looks delighted, and says so.

‘But I must go and make myself presentable.’

‘Oh, no. We will dispense with *toilette de rigueur*,’ Sir Galahad blandly tells him. ‘Miss Græme is going to the opera again to-night with Talbot and his sister, and I think I shall look in as well, as I have not seen Nillson in “Lucia” yet; but I daresay you will be amply compensated for our absence by my mother’s society—and Miss Cathcart’s!’ he adds, with a Grandisonian bow to me.

I return it with a glance in which anger, surprise, and mortification are mingled. It does not cost him much to give

me up, that is certain. I put on a worldly mask which is foreign to my nature, and force a smile to my lip to hide its trembling.

‘I am very glad you are going to stay, Mr Fleming. I am not a bit tired of the subject we were discussing.’

I mean, of course, Jack Temple; but my words have a *sens double*, for Miss Græme remarks to Mr Talbot, in an audible stage whisper,—

‘Pearl is an apt scholar! Who would believe that Robert rescued her fresh from the wilds only nine months ago, and that she is but twenty! She takes to flirtation as naturally as a duck to water.’

Mr Talbot has not the valour of a mouse; he never attempts to contradict her, but screws up his mouth into a button, and drops one eyelid in a way which may denote intelligence, but which is assuredly unbecoming. I know that Miss Græme’s words have reached every ear in the room. If I am to be hanged, let me do something to deserve it. I speak out loud,—

‘I have often heard of flirtation in the abstract—a misty, intangible way that puzzles me. I *should* like to have it clearly defined. Can you give me any practical ideas of it, Mr Fleming?’ and I look up prettily and pleadingly in his face.

He does not answer for a moment, but his eyes speak volumes. Then he leans close to me.

‘I would not have you know more than you do for the world. It is your very freshness, your simplicity, that has taken my heart by storm!’

I feel I am going too far. I did not care to risk a ‘declaration,’ and I try to generalise the conversation.

‘Then I shall ask someone else to teach me. Miss Græme, I am sure *you* can define the word flirtation.’

‘Look in the dictionary if you want to know,’ she answers, sharply

I jump up and get Webster.

‘“Flirtation—noun; a flirting—a quick sprightly motion;” oh! that’s what the fan is for!’ I exclaim, innocently.

Miss Græme sees Sir Galahad looking at her with a touch of contempt on his mouth. She gathers herself up and shuts

the fan with a snap, and if glances could kill, a requiem for my departed soul would burst out at this moment.

‘The heat is stifling, and it is time to go upstairs to dress,’ she says, crossly, as she leaves the room.

I follow her after a minute, looking neither to the right nor the left.

Dinner is over, and the viands have been done ample justice to; but the cutlets and *rissoles* were eaten in silence, and even the champagne was not conducive to hilarity—the truth is, we were an ill-assorted party.

Mrs Haviland has ensconced herself in her arm-chair, to carry out the duties of chaperonage comfortably. Miss Græme, in the glories of peach-blossom silk, is gone to Drury Lane with Mr Talbot and Sir Galahad as her *preux chevaliers*, and I did violence to my conscience when I uttered a ‘pleasant evening’ to them. The night is unusually sultry. Great black clouds are chasing one another in the sky, betokening a storm, and Mr Fleming and I, in order to catch the faintest breeze that may be wafted across the park, break through orthodox rules and sit just outside the window on the balcony. I am very silent. My heart feels as if one of the biggest of the dark clouds overhead had come down and settled upon it; in truth I am too listless and inert to struggle, ever so feebly, against the untoward destiny that has yielded me to my companion’s society for the space of a long evening. He has it all his own way with no contradiction, as his soft nothings fall on one ear and go out of the other, till at last he touches on a theme which at once stirs my pulse into active life.

‘I cannot make Haviland out,’ are the words that rouse me from the apathy that has stolen over me, and made me little better than an idol of wood for Mr Fleming to worship. ‘At Glenthorn he gave me a polite but decided hint that my absence was more to be desired than my presence. And now he not only invites me to dinner, but leaves us together like this. He is a regular brick!’

‘He is a stone,’ I mutter to myself.

‘Can you account for the change?’

‘No. Mr Haviland, with all his apparent frankness, is sometimes quite beyond my comprehension,’ I say, sadly.

'I don't believe anyone understands him so well as Miss Græme.'

I don't add this because it is my conviction, but for a feeler; and yet I dread the reply I may call forth.

'Talbot tells me that Haviland does not approve of his attentions to Miss Græme—that, in fact, she is acting contrary to his desire in receiving them.'

'Did Miss Græme tell Mr Talbot this?'

'Yes, I fancy so. She is one of those girls that look like stolid, matter-of-fact Gretchens, but who gush at times in a surprising manner. As Talbot is the eldest son, and Blechington is a magnificent property, with a long rent-roll, I cannot surmise what objections Haviland can have—unless indeed he intends to marry her himself. By Jove! how uncommonly well she would look at the head of the table at Glenthorn, with the Haviland diamonds crowning her imperial brow!'

I shake all over.

'You are not cold, are you?' And he touches one of my arms, that my loose sleeve leaves bare.

'Why, you are cold this hot night, Pearl?' he says, tenderly.

I am not ill bodily, but mentally I am suffering torture, as I picture the future Mrs Haviland in her resplendent beauty and attire. I let my head go back with a thud against the window frame, and large tears trickle one after another down my cheeks. I feel so utterly miserable that I don't care what happens to me. What does happen to me is this—Mr Fleming draws my head on to his shoulder by a quick movement, which takes me by surprise, and his face is approaching very close, when I start up with a cry, at what I fancy is the ghost of Sir Galahad, stalking towards us from the other end of the balcony. It is Sir Galahad himself, with features white and rigid.

'What! come back already. Haviland?' Mr Fleming says, nervously.

'Already!—why, it is close upon midnight! The time seems to have flown very pleasantly to you two.'

'It has to me,' Mr Fleming confesses, in a loverlike tone that irritates me.

I say nothing. The keen blue eyes I love are scorching me up with scorn and anger. Mrs Haviland is still enjoying her quiet *siesta*, and we have not noticed the hour.

Voilà tout.

Yet with so little real blame to us, I feel unutterably ashamed. Will Sir Galahad ever believe that I am not an apt scholar in flirtation?—that there is no feeling in my breast save indifference towards the man whom I allowed to draw my head on his shoulder, to whisper tender words in my ear.

My guardian is not himself to-night. His manner has lost its ease, his features their serenity. He walks up to the arm-chair in which his mother lies in a delicious post-prandial sleep, and rouses her in an ungente voice and summary manner that are quite foreign to his habitual tenderness and deference towards her; and before Mrs Haviland's eyes are fairly open on the scene of my tribulation, he wishes Mr Fleming an ultra-friendly good night, and with a formal one to my shrinking self, he leaves the room.

Mr Fleming seizes the opportunity to whisper a fervent *addio* close to my ear, but his honeyed words fall unappreciated, and are scarcely heard. I am desperately angry with myself, and scorn and shame at my supine behaviour wither me up into half my normal size. But I try to console myself with the thought that I have circumvented Miss Græme, and thrown *poudre aux yeux* at Mr Fleming. Above all, Sir Galahad must not believe that he and his worldly goods are my aim.

CHAPTER XVII.

QUERELLE D'ALLEMAND.

'Naught under heaven so strongly doth allure
The sence of man, and also his minde possess,
As beauties' lovely baite.'

Spenser.

'MAIS qu'as-tu donc, mon enfant, qu'as-tu?'

Susanne's sympathetic voice awakes me from a sleep in which I have been crying. I have been dreaming the darkest hour of my life all over again; the hour in which papa died, the hour in which I pledged myself to become Bertrand de Volnay's wife.

Papa's face so white and so full of anxiety, Bertrand's features so flushed and so eager, have risen up before me in the lonely night watch. The poor wan face I loved and lost! the other one that I hate to look upon! I awake with a start, and stare at Susanne with scared eyes, fancying I am at La Roche once more.

'Les jolies choses!' she exclaims, with the delight of a peasant in aught that savours of 'cadeaux.' I raise my head languidly and look round, and remember that it is my birthday, a fact that, in the turmoil of my feelings, I had utterly forgotten. Santa Claus has been liberal. Mysterious packages, neatly wrapped in white paper, lie on the table, and beside them is a *corbeille* of superb hot-house flowers, fit to grace an imperial wedding-feast. Susanne, in her impatience for my enjoyment, seizes all of them *en masse* in her ample arms, and deposits them on the bed. I take up the floral offering first. The subtle fragrance from the tinted blossoms tempts me. A card glimmers in the corner—'Mr Walter Fleming, Albany.'

With the first impulse that I am sure must have actuated Eve when she beheld the noisome reptile crawling among the Eden flowers, I shrink, and push the basket aside, while scented petals scatter the coverlet.

'For Pearl, with best love,' in Mrs Haviland's writing.

It is a beautiful likeness of papa, copied from an old faded picture in my possession, and set in a massive locket. I kiss my treasure a dozen times, and cry and laugh over it by turns like a lunatic; and faithful Susanne keeps me company throughout the gamut, from the risible to the lachrymose. A small round box, addressed 'Miss Cathcart,' in Sir Galahad's bold hand. After my shameful conduct of last night I dare hardly open it. A note lies on the top. It is the first I have ever received from him, and I turn it backwards and forwards, while my fingers love to linger upon it:—

'I scarcely like to send the enclosed *now*. It was ordered three weeks ago, just before we left Glenthorn. Women are enigmas that I have never cared to solve before you and I met. Pearl, need I say that I have miserably failed in my first attempt? In spite of all you said to me on Tuesday

evening, when you went out of your way to convince me of your indifference, my feelings are unaltered. On this, your birthday, receive the assurance that, whatever happens, you will always find a sincere friend in
R. H.'

This is all—a cold, calm note, whose very kindliness and calmness irritate me; a thousand times rather would I have had cutting, scornful words, that showed me he could *feel* as keenly as I do myself; still I surreptitiously press the letter to my heart, and read it again and again before I think of diving further into the box. When I do, I find a band bracelet with my monogram, A. C., in pearls and brilliants, that excites an awe in Susanne by its richness, and makes me still more ashamed of myself. Examining it, the monogram springs back, leaving revealed the photographs of Sir Galahad and his mother.

My guardian's eyes look straight into mine, and I can look back at them with my whole soul in my gaze. I send away Susanne, on the pretext of fetching a cup of coffee, and then I revel, a veritable Epicurean in my Sybaritical feast. There are the broad open brow, the fair curling hair, the firm, strong lips of my darling, who thinks I am indifferent to him. Would to God I were! I may rain down kisses on his face now unrebuked.

'Unrebuked,' did I say? I forgot the small, still voice that whispers to me Bertrand de Volnay's name—a name that rises up like the skeleton at the Egyptian festival, and turns my golden fruit into Dead Sea apples, while all the glittering hope that makes life delicious falls away before me in a heap of worthless ashes.

So be it. My cross presses heavily, and I must bear it. Meanwhile, what does Solomon tell us?—'Gather ye rosebuds while ye may.' But even while I apply the advice to myself I know I am quibbling with the truth—that a good woman would not seek temptation, but fly from it.

I rise at last and go through the operation of dressing, with Sir Galahad's picture lying before me; and when I descend to breakfast the locket and bracelet lighten up my dusky charms.

'Many happy returns of the day, dear;' and Mrs Havi-

land kisses me on the cheek, while, in obedience to the Scriptures, and to my own feelings as well, I turn the other one to her likewise, and thank her heartily for her gift. Then I pass Miss Græme with a careless nod, and walk bravely right up to Sir Galahad, who is conning the *Times* a little apart.

When I get near him I cannot speak a word. I feel as if I shall choke if I do ; but I suppose, when speech fails, silence is eloquent. I know that my eyes are looking at him wistfully—that deprecation sits humbly on my mouth—that my heart is full of him, and yearning towards him ; and I hold out shyly a thin little wrist that seems overweighted by the sparkling bracelet. It is my birthday, and it will be doubly hard if I find Sir Galahad implacable and cruel to-day.

He turns towards me in the midst of his perusal of a fierce debate, and our eyes meet. The red blood rushes to his face and changes the expression of his features in a moment. I don't know, I don't care, to analyse the cause, when the result is that he catches my fingers in a warm clasp, and his voice says, so very, very low that none can hear him but I,—

‘God bless you, child, and make you happy!’

With these words ringing in my ears, I go away, and sit down at the morning meal in a dream—a dream from which I do not wish to waken up ; and when the table is cleared I steal upstairs, and ponder over the words, and feel that I *shall* be blest and happy, since *he* wishes it.

Three o'clock brings Mr Fleming, according to our compact, accompanied by Jack Temple. Jack is a Cathcart in appearance—a tall *svelte* figure, with fair Saxon tints, large violet eyes, and patrician features. The moment I set eyes on him, I like him for the sake of his resemblance to papa ; and he returns the compliment. Frank and impulsive, he is not content with a hand-clasp, and I only evade a hearty cousinly embrace by catching the kiss on the tip of my ear. My guardian, without being prudish, has as strict notions as an Oriental on the propriety of women, and this little demonstration evokes a frown, that puckers up his brow with a dozen wrinkles that I long to smoothe away. My new-found relative and I sit down on a sofa, while he pours out his domestic trials to me.

‘Of course you have heard about my mother, Pearl?’

‘Who told you I was called Pearl?’ I ask in surprise.

‘Why, Fleming, to be sure. He murmurs it in his sleep and apostrophises it in waking. He is terribly far gone, my little cousin. And you?’

‘Not a bit,’ I say confidentially. ‘He is not in the least my style. I hate dark men.’

‘Allow me to thank you,’ he answers, getting up and making me a low bow. He has taken the compliment to himself, and all the while I am thinking how nice my guardian looks with the broad daylight streaming in upon him from the window.

I don’t care to talk about Mr Fleming. He has placed himself exactly opposite to us, and we are evidently an attractive pair, for his gaze never swerves from this direction.

‘Tell me about your mother—my aunt. You cannot think how nice it is to have an aunt and cousin!’

‘Dear little thing! I had no notion I had such strong cousinly proclivities till within the last ten minutes.’ And Jack takes my hand and pats it familiarly.

I withdraw it, not from any especial modesty or prudery, but because I remember *who* clasped it this morning—a clasp that seems to linger on it still.

‘Well, about my mother,’ he rattles on. ‘I was very fond of her until lately, now I can’t *bear* her.’

His unfilial speech amazes me.

‘Fie!’ I say, reprovably.

‘No, I don’t deserve blame for it, I swear. She is old enough to be wiser; and would you believe it, she has forgotten my poor dear father, who was the best man in creation, for a horrible foreigner, with nothing to recommend him but a huge pair of black whiskers and a set of large white teeth. To my eyes he is a most repulsive-looking brute; but she is infatuated, and worships him, and yet I believe she is half afraid of him.’

‘Afraid of him!—why?’

It seems to me quite a new phase in affection to be afraid of anyone one loves—he or she may grieve you, hurt your feelings, but not excite terror—‘perfect love casteth out fear,’ surely.

My cousin's sunny face clouds over.

'I don't know why,' he says, gravely. Then he bursts out passionately, 'If I caught the fellow laying so much as a finger on her, I would break every bone in his body.'

'Has she been married long?'

'No, only a few months. I saw her about three weeks after the wedding, but I was so disgusted with my new papa that I have not been near her since.'

'Where is she?'

'Rusticating in a broken-down old château near Namur in Belgium, and a wretched isolated life she must lead, for Count Delaville, as he styles himself, is scarcely a man to devote himself to a woman a dozen years older than himself, unless it was for an interested motive. There, don't let us talk any more about the matter—it hips me so.'

Jack is decidedly slangy, but he is very nice. Already I feel proud of him, with a sisterly admiration and liking.

'I hope I shall see you very, very often,' I say impressively.

'Why, of course you will. That is, if that stern individual in the window there does not prohibit our meeting,' and he points covertly with a disrespectful finger to Sir Galahad. I resent his manner of allusion, but keep my resentment to myself. 'He is your guardian, isn't he? Guardians must be awful nuisances, I fancy. How do you get on with him, Pearl?'

'So, so,' I reply, in an indifferent tone. Jack *is* very nice, but I don't think much of his powers of discrimination. Fancy anyone thinking Sir Galahad an 'awful nuisance!'

'Not *very* well?' my cousin interrogates, pityingly. 'Does he approve of Fleming being your very devoted?'

'Well, no,' I answer, with hesitation. My cousinly interview is turning out an inquisition I did not expect, and I am embarrassed. Still I do not desire anyone to labour under a false impression of Sir Galahad's character. 'The fact is, he has good reasons for objecting,' I assert, wielding my cudgels right imperially. I fall from the frying-pan into the fire.

'He is making the running himself—eh?' he laughs.

'I don't understand,' and this is the truth. Sporting expressions are enigmatical to me. Sir Galahad, although a first-rate cross-country rider and sportsman, invariably keeps all horsey jargon for the stables.

‘He wants to keep you all to himself, I mean. Pearl, as sure as I am alive, the man is in love with you!’

Even to hear it hinted at sends my blood bounding through my veins.

‘What makes you fancy so?’ I whisper, tremulously, in a soft little voice, that to my own ears has a cooing sound in it, but which I could not for the life of me make cold and indifferent.

Jack leans towards me, and stares me out of countenance for a moment.

‘And, by Jove! *you* are in love with him!’ he cries vehemently.

‘Hush! oh! hush!—*don’t* say such things!’ I implore, piteously, as I glance unconsciously round to see if anyone has heard his remark. Thank heaven, Miss Græme is deep in her designs on Sir Galahad and Mr Talbot combined.

Between two stools she will fall to the ground, but that is her look-out, not mine.

‘I am engaged, but it is a secret.’

‘To him?’

‘Oh, no!’ The words rise up flat and wretched from the very depths of my soul. I could not pronounce them lightly if I tried. With Olympus before me, near me, so near as to be in sight, and within touch, to have to fall back on Hades. It is hard—hard!

‘Then to whom?’

‘To a Belgian.’

‘Bah! one of these beastly foreigners again. What is his name?’

‘Bertrand de Volnay.’

‘Whom I can see at once you *don’t* love.’

I only sigh for a response.

‘Poor little Pearl! I pity you from my heart!’

And, in spite of a natural aversion to pity, his pity does not offend me; in fact, I am glad to have some one to whom I can show my real feelings—it is a relief to them.

‘And when are you to be turned off?’

‘Turned off?—by Mr Haviland?’

‘Not exactly, little goose. When are you to be spliced?’
I shake my head; again I am forced to show my ignorance.

‘You see, I am only half English,’ I explain, deprecatingly, ‘and I don’t understand the language properly yet.’

‘Well, when do you become Bertrand de Volnay’s wife? Is that plain enough?’ he asks, with an amused smile.

Yes, that is quite plain enough—so plain that the ‘fact’ stares up vividly at me, and makes me turn white and cold. There have been times lately when I have lapped myself in Elysian visions, and dreamed that such a fate might be averted somehow; but the times have been rare. As a rule, I look through a yellow glass, instead of a rose-coloured one, on all things now.

‘In May next,’ I reply, almost inaudibly—but his quick ear catches the words.

‘Almost a year! Cheer up—you don’t know what may happen between this and then,’ he says, comfortingly.

‘What *could* happen?’ I murmur, hopelessly.

‘Foreigners are fickle—he may throw you over. What a wound to your pride that would be!’

What balm to my spirit! I think to myself. Oh, if Bertrand would but fall in love with some one more worthy of him than I—some one who could give him her whole heart—some one who would save me from standing before God’s altar with perjured lips!

‘Don’t let us talk of him,’ I say, with a grimace. ‘It makes me feel cross all day.’

Meanwhile, Miss Græme has been studying my cousin’s lineaments. The hazel eyes have wandered up and down from his forehead to his chin, and back again, admiringly, and her full red lips relax into a benign smile as she addresses me.

‘Pearl, it is really quite selfish of you to monopolise Mr Temple entirely.’

Jack looks up and meets her glance. It is another case of the spider and the fly. Her beauty ensnares him. It is a glittering bait his unripe years are not strong enough to resist. She catches him in the meshes of her golden hair, and draws him under her syren spell. He leaves me unceremoniously, and in another minute is seated beside her, to the discomfiture of Mr Talbot, who retires from the field and falls into the rear, by Mrs Haviland. Miss Græme knows

Jack is moderately wealthy—that his father left him sole heir to his large fortune, with the exception of ten thousand pounds legacy to his widow ; and she plays her game steadily and surely. To her diamonds are trump cards, but she is careful not to show her hand to the parties interested.

If Jack would but listen to Theophrastus and shun her, like the Lurley, before he comes to his destruction ! His handsome, boyish face bends over her animated and flushed, and with his two hands he holds a skein of bright floss silk, which her fair fingers are winding slowly. It is only a preliminary to weaving a web long as Penelope's, and as difficult to unravel, around him. I watch them sadly. I am sorry for Jack.

'You think Mimi has captivated your cousin, and you are unhappy about it, Pearl ! Are you jealous ?' says Sir Galahad, as he throws himself down into the seat Jack has vacated. There is a reproachful ring in his voice.

'Yes ! and no ! I *am* unhappy for my cousin, but I am not jealous,' I reply, quietly.

'Sure you are not jealous of Miss Græme ?'

I look at him for a moment steadily. I have fallen into a habit of speaking the truth to him in spite of everything—the habit sticks to me now.

'Perhaps I am,' I say, slowly.

He leans closer towards me.

'Pearl, do you think that anyone who really cared for you would ever like Mimi ? You are as different as light and darkness.'

I take it *au pied de la lettre*. My sensitive temperament flies to arms forthwith.

'Of course I am the darkness,' I murmur, with a curl of my lip.

'No, you are not, to *me*,' he whispers, softly. His voice stirs my pulse always, and in spite of me I blush hotly.

'What sort of birthday have you had ?' he asks, presently.

'These have made it a happy one,' I say, pointing to my ornaments. 'I have not thanked you for my bracelet yet !'

'Will you keep the likeness always, Pearl ?' he questions, eagerly.

'Always !' I reply ; then I suddenly remember that I shall have no right to it if he marries Miss Græme. 'That is, until

Miss Græme becomes Mrs Haviland,' I add, passionately. The thought lashes me into fury, and I throw the bracelet, which I have been examining again, angrily into my lap.

'Rather until you become Madame de Volnay,' he says, low and sadly. 'Oh! Pearl, when I think of it I feel—'

'Very glad to be rid of your cares of guardianship,' I interrupt, lightly. Mr Fleming has moved round close, and is within earshot, but Sir Galahad's back is towards him.

'Pearl!' A pair of passionate blue eyes rest on me wrathfully, a hand steals down and touches mine. 'Do you say that, believing it?'

'Yes, of course!' I know that Mr Fleming is listening to every word; now is the time to prove to him how fallacious were Miss Græme's assertions regarding my desire to secure so good a *parti* as Sir Galahad. 'I cannot expect you to throw away your time in looking after me simply because I am your ward, when your cousin, whom you love, requires all your attention!' I speak this flippantly and indifferently; he snatches away his hand from my vicinity, and the gesture stabs my soul. He is offended at my tone.

'God knows what I have done!' he says, piteously. 'Not a day passes that we do not fall out somehow. It is not my fault, I am sure.'

'It is mine,' I retort. 'I have not so good a temper as Miss Græme; and the contrast is too much for you.'

'No, you have not so good a temper as Mimi,' he answers, very slowly, as if he wishes to impress the lamentable fact on my mind. 'Moreover, she is not so variable in her moods.'

'No—she is always warm,' I mutter.

He smiles. I feel that I have been making a fool of myself in showing my jealousy.

'Of course it does not matter to me what she is—I am only sorry for Jack,' I add, untruthfully, but to put him on the wrong track. 'I like my cousin very much—I feel as if I had known him all my life, and I cannot bear that he should be trifled with,' I say, hotly.

Jack is still holding the skein on his fingers, and Miss Græme's long perfumed curls almost sweep his cheek as she bends in her occupation.

'It strikes me you are almost as warm as Mimi—to most

men,' Sir Galahad remarks, angrily. 'To-day your affection for Mr Temple has sprung up with the growth of a fungus, and yesterday you were engrossed with Mr Fleming. It seems to me that you are in a fair way to become that anomaly in human nature—a coquette, casting away your admirers like old gloves, and looking on men's hearts as toys of an hour—I pity Bertrand de Volnay!'

He *pities* Bertrand!—pities him because he will be *my* husband! Merciful powers, my whole being rises up in rebellion. Sir Galahad is worse than I, for he is a man flirt—that most despicable thing on earth. He has murmured love words in my ear, he has caressed me, his hand has clasped mine close, and yet the feeling I have inspired him with is simply 'pity' for the man with whom I shall pass my future.

'Spare your pity,' I say, proudly. 'Bertrand does not need commiseration—he is quite content with the coquette he has captured. The biggest flirts make the best matrons, they say. Who knows, Mr Haviland, but that I may turn out a model wife?—that my love for my husband may be cited as something extraordinary and to be envied? Bertrand is very handsome and very devoted. I might have done worse,' I say, in a quick, unpleasant way that makes him wince.

'Complimentary to Fleming,' he answers, 'and to myself.'

'Oh! I did not mean you—I never thought of you. Everyone says you are Miss Græme's property. Here, give her this—she has more right to it than I have.' And I unclasp my precious bracelet and push it towards him.

He does not speak a word. It seems to me as if tears are glistening in his dear eyes; but he averts them too quickly for me to be sure. He takes the bracelet, and quietly puts it into his pocket, and rising slowly from the couch, walks out of the room. Before I have time to collect myself, Mr Fleming is beside me.

'I have been a listener unwittingly, Miss Cathcart, and wish I had not heard so much,' he says, sorrowfully.

'About what?' I ask. I am laconic, but my thoughts are with my bracelet, and I cannot talk.

'About Monsieur de Volnay. So you *are* engaged, Miss Cathcart?'

Whether it is that he has suddenly frozen, or whether it is

the new dignity I have assumed in his eyes as a *fiancée*, I know not, but I am glad he has ceased to designate me familiarly as Pearl.

'Yes! I thought you knew it. Mr Haviland told you, didn't he?'

'He said something which I did not comprehend. He led me, in fact, to fancy that he was the happy man.'

'Which I explained to you was a mistake. If you have heard all our conversation, Mr Fleming, you must know that Mr Haviland's opinion of me is not too flattering—that in truth he would consider himself a very *unhappy* man if I was engaged to him.'

I am merely following the vein of my own thoughts.

'He thinks you a coquette, Miss Cathcart. Will you pardon me if I say that I endorse his sentiment?'

I writhe with anger inwardly. Sir Galahad's animadversions wounded me to the quick—this man's words sound like insolence. I turn upon him haughtily with flashing eyes.

'Might not you be duped by your own self-conceit, and have fancied a liking that never showed itself by word or look?'

'Please do not be so hard on me,' he begs. 'It is bad enough to find what a fool I have been, without being an object for your wrath and contempt.'

My conscience pricks me sorely. I know that, to serve as a cloak for other feelings, I have apparently flirted with him—in the letter, if not in the spirit.

'Forgive me,' I say, quite humbly, 'if I have led you to believe that I liked you better than as a friend. You see, Mr Fleming, I am only a stupid country girl, and I did not really mean to coquet with you—indeed I did not!'

'I am not vindictive by nature, Miss Cathcart, but I can't help *hating* Monsieur de Volnay.'

'And so do—' I stop short, and pinch myself as a punishment for the licence I allow my unruly member.

Mr Fleming's countenance brightens up. Perhaps, like Jack, he fancies Bertrand may prove fickle, and leave me to wear the willow. If they only knew how much more pleasant a willow crown would be than a cypress one!

'Let us be friends, if we can be nothing more,' he says

amicably. I am quite willing. I have not many friends in the world, and the addition of one is not to be despised. My companion is of a springy nature, like the sofa we are sitting on, and he rebounds under sorrow or disappointment's hand. His dark eyes are as bright as their wont, and his lips have thrown off their pained expression for a smile, as he proposes truce. I smile too, though my heart is very heavy. Peace is established again, and Mr Fleming and I shake hands on it. The action is *mal-à-propos*, for in the midst of it my guardian walks in for his hat, preparatory to going down to a Greenwich dinner, which will keep him till long after we have all retired. His face is grave, and with a general adieu he leaves hastily. With him dies out my fête day. I am glad when ten o'clock sends us to bed. We keep country hours—that is, Mrs Haviland and I do. But Miss Græme turns night into day with a succession of balls. She is gone to one to-night, with pearls gleaming in her hair and round her neck and arms, and white silk flowing in great lustrous waves round her; and before she went she sent off an invitation for Jack, so that he might be there to gaze on her beauty.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SPIDER AND THE FLY.

“ ‘Will you walk into my parlour?’
Said the spider to the fly;
‘Tis the prettiest little parlour
That ever you did spy.’ ”

CLICK! click! Mrs Haviland's knitting-needles seem to go through my head, and give sharp, short pricks to my temper; but I reproach myself for being irritated, since domestic occupations, such as knitting and tatting, are the greatest panaceas she has for any thorns in her flesh. So I poke the tips of my fingers into my ears, and settle down to read studiously; but it won't do. The latest importation from Mudie is either flat

and a failure, or else my wits are wool-gathering. My attention wavers, and involuntarily I become an eavesdropper to a conversation that is being more murmured than whispered in the room. As I said before, Mrs Haviland is a little hard of hearing, and, presuming on the affliction, the voices, perhaps, are less low than they would be otherwise. Miss Græme, fair as morning, sits playing negligently with the charms on her chatelaine, and by her sits my cousin, Jack Temple. From a distant point of view, in the semi-darkness induced by green Venetian blinds, it would almost seem as though two shades of fair hair were being closely contrasted. Jack's eyes feast unchecked on his companion's beautiful face, and scintillate and darken, and express openly enough the havoc that that face has made in his young heart. But Miss Græme never meets his glance honestly and fully—her large hazel eyes have a knack of eluding a face-to-face look ; though from under her curling golden lashes she steals covertly certain warm and pleasant glances, that appear to thrill his features into a world of animation.

‘Mimi.’

His voice is soft, and feeling modulates it musically ; but it falls clearly enough on me. Only a few weeks acquainted, and she is ‘Mimi’ to him already !

‘I have a favour to ask of you.’

‘Granted before asked,’ she answers him most graciously ; and up flies another *œil sucré* at him.

‘I do not want you to waltz with that fellow Talbot any more.’

‘But why?’ whilst the placidity that characterises her face is slightly marred by a pucker of annoyance across the forehead.

‘Why?—because it pains me to see you dance waltzes with any man, but more especially with a man that is in love with you.’

‘In that case I should have to give up nearly all my partners,’ she says, in a conceited little voice, and with a thorough belief in the truth of her assertion ; but she looks so wonderfully white and pure, so like a lily as she sits there, that no one would dream of accusing her of being unwomanly, or free of speech.

‘Yes, I know,’ Jack answers, with a sigh of profound conviction that the name of his rivals is Legion.

He remains silent for a little while, chewing the cud of sweet and bitter fancy, and staring at his lady-love all the while, in a perfect imbecility of admiration. It is not to be wondered at; a stronger brain than his might be turned by the syren’s charms—a harder heart than beats in his breast might melt in adoration of such a miracle of beauty as she is.

‘We shall meet at Lady Osborne’s to-night?’ he asks her, as anxiously as though his life depended on it; and so it does, *pro tem.*, for if he did not see her he believes he would starve to death for the sweetness that would go out of his existence.

‘Yes,’ she replies, languidly. To her Jack is only one of a hoard of flies that buzz in her dangerous vicinity, and, insatiable spider as she is, one victim is not worth much.

‘Will you throw over Talbot, and give me the waltzes I know you promised him?’ he pleads, earnestly. ‘Mimi, you cannot think how I suffer when his arm is round your waist.’

She gives a little low laugh, and hesitates to speak. She has evidently no desire to vex Jack, yet she probably remembers that Mr Talbot is an excellent *parti* to fall back on, and that the Blechington acres are not to be despised.

‘I must not be so bare-facedly rude as to give you the dances, but, if you like, I will invent an excuse, and get Robert to take care of me while they last. Will *that* please you?’

She smiles at him meekly and benignly, as though she were right willing to immolate herself to any extent to do him pleasure.

But Jack looks a little dubious, and strokes the soft, amber-hued down on his undecided chin in a reflective manner. ‘Robert’ is a rival too, for he has surely seen the glances, more loving than cousinly, that those hazel eyes are in the habit of casting at Sir Galahad.

‘I do not know,’ he says, with a scrutinising look at her features; but they are as impassive at this moment as if sculptured in stone. ‘Perhaps I should be inclined to fear Haviland more than Talbot, more than anyone, in fact—if I did not fancy that he had a lurking weakness for my small coz there.’

I dive my head down to my book, in order to hide the tell-tale blood that tingles in my cheeks. My guardian's 'lurking weakness' is a momentous tower of strength to me, and I await anxiously Miss Græme's opinion on the subject.

She laughs out satirically—a peal in which I can discern a harsh, grating discordance. Without looking at her, I can well imagine the feline flash in her eye as she says, flippantly,—

'What a very ridiculous notion to have got into your head! She is not even Robert's taste. He was only saying yesterday how much he admired Lady Clementina Dillon, and how he disliked little dark things.

Lady Clementina Dillon, although the daughter of a hundred earls, is not one to be desired. She is a huge, ungainly woman, with vivid flesh-tints like a dairy-maid, and a heap of sandy hair. I clench my teeth, and almost gnash them loud enough to be heard.

Evidently Jack feels a sort of family slight put upon him, for he replies, quickly,—

'I do not know about "little dark things," but whether Haviland admires her or not, Pearl is as pretty a girl as one could wish to see.'

'To *your* thinking, perhaps,' Miss Græme retorts, with a contemptuous curl of her scarlet lip. 'But you see Robert is ultra-fastidious—so few come up to his taste. But then he has a right to be *difficile*.'

'Why has he a greater right to be fastidious than any other man?'

'Simply because he is one in a thousand himself—so nice, so perfect in every way. she says, with *empressement*.

Jack waxes exceedingly wroth. It is easy to perceive by his heightened colour and his manner that she has irritated him, and, boy like, he retaliates with a little *malice prepense*.

'Yes, I think Haviland is fastidious, since even you have failed in fascinating him.'

She flushes up, and looks as if she could kill him with the lightning of her eye for half an instant; then she recovers herself, and shakes off all appearance of annoyance, for she is far greater at diplomacy than my poor unworldly cousin.

'Of course you are either joking or else you are blind. Surely you must know that if I wished it I could be mistress

of Glenthorn to-morrow,' she asserts, blandly, with a pitying smile on her face at the small perceptive faculties her companion evidently possesses.

And Jack believes her—believes that she is as innocent of scheming as a babe unborn. How could he dream that any woman so young and so passing lovely as Miss Græme is, can be capable of harbouring such vile things as deceit or falsehood? So he quakes at the idea of losing her, and—shows his trouble as plainly as a child would do.

'But you, Mimi, you will not throw me over for anyone now, now that I have begun to find life so delightful—that is, the life here—by your side?'

A weak and limping avowal truly, with no rhetoric about it; but he says it with such genuine pathos, so thoroughly from his heart of hearts, that it *ought* to reach hers if it does not.

'Mimi, do you know that I have never been in love before?'

'No! really?'

'I swear it! But then I have never met anyone like *you* before.'

Jack's simple flattery, no matter how sincere, must be very innocent diet after the highly-seasoned compliments she is used to. But the very contrast perhaps makes it acceptable and pleasant, for she visibly brightens up and answers, coquettishly,

'You foolish boy! I do believe you fancy you are fond of me.'

'Fancy I am fond of you! Why, don't you know that I love you with all my soul?'

Just as he says this, his features all aglow, and his head bent down close to hers, the door is thrown open to admit a whole posse of 'morning callers,' but before Miss Græme advances with her slow stately step to greet them, I mark a white hand glittering with gems pass caressingly over Jack's tweed sleeve, and a pair of hazel eyes, humid with tenderness, lifted up to his face. My cousin saunters up a few minutes later to the part of the room where I have ensconced myself, and sits down by my side. I note his sparkling eyes and bright colour with solicitude, for I know he is laying up a store of Dead Sea fruit, and that before long he will find his treasure crumble into a big heap of worthless ashes.

'I had a letter from my mother to-day, Pearl. I told her you and I had met, and she seems very much interested about you,' he says to me, in a cheerful ringing voice.

'Is she?' I reply indifferently. My temper is ruffled, my feelings are sorely tried, and I think that I hate everybody and everything for the nonce.

'What is the matter with you to-day?' Jack asks, trying to peer inquisitively into my flushed face and under the lids, which I keep determinedly lowered, in the hope of concealing the foolish tear that I know has oozed out in one corner of my eye. 'You seem put out, little coz, has anyone been worrying or annoying you?'

It never strikes him that his converse with his Circe is generally held in a tone that is meant to be *sotto voce*, but which, in moments of excitement, is apt to rise and to be distinct to sharp ears like mine. I am not going to lower my dignity by confessing to all I have heard, so I shake my head and keep silence. He continues staring at me, as if he wanted to discover if I am so very dark as they say. People have an antipathy to little dark things like me, and oh! I wish I had never been born, or that I could hide myself in some quiet nook where fastidious eyes could pick no holes in my personal defects. Like the leopard and the Ethiopian, I must rest content with my skin.

'My mother is very anxious that you should go and stay with her in Belgium.'

Here is my chance!

'Is she?' I exclaim, eagerly. 'I should like to go to her above all things.'

'Would you *really*, Pearl?' And Jack beams with gratitude at my cordial recognition of his mother's kindness and hospitality. 'But it will be awful work for you—no one but the old lady for society, unless that big brute of a foreigner is hovering about. But I believe he is away, so you may escape him. You will be a tremendous comfort to her, poor old soul. You are of her own flesh and blood, you see, and though she would not confess it (for she is one of those women who would die game), I am sure she must often feel very miserable at being so far from her old life and her old friends. Shall I write and tell her that you consent to go?'

‘Yes! yes!’ I mutter, hoarsely. I want to get the affirmative out clearly and firmly, but somehow it seems to stick in my throat.

‘And about when?’

I reflect an instant. This is the twentieth of July, I feel that I *must* be at dear old Glenthorn once more, if even for a little while. I shall not probably look upon it again, for I shall try to remain with my aunt until Bertrand takes me away.

‘I will go on the fifteenth of August, if that will suit her.’

‘All right, your time will be sure to suit her. And she will look forward to seeing you with real pleasure, I know. Dear little Pearl, you cannot think how happy it makes me to think that you will be with her, able to look after her a bit, and fight her battles for her—for she has grown very feeble and nervous lately. She seems quite broken, as it were.’

And Jack’s eyes water, but he brushes his coat-sleeve hastily against them. I feel a world of commiseration for him rise up in my heart, and experience quite a Quixotic feeling for my aunt, when Jack makes a remark that turns the current of my thoughts into a different channel.

‘By-the-bye, you will have to ask Haviland’s consent to your going. He may not approve of his ward venturing out of his sight.’

‘Why not?’ I cry, angrily. ‘I am not a baby, to be under coercion, I suppose; besides,’ and I cannot help my voice sinking into a sadder and minor key, in spite of my efforts to steady it, ‘he will be only too glad to be rid of me!’

Jack regards me curiously, and purses his mouth into a button, as if contemplating a whistle; then he collapses into silence, with a kind of pity in his look.

I am assuredly riled. It is bad enough to feel a friendless, driven-from-home sort of being, but the Cathcarts are proud—proud as the traditional Lucifer, and the Cathcart *sangre azul* bubbles up furiously within me, so I muster up courage, and, looking my cousin quite pleasantly in the face, I say, quietly,—

‘You know I have a double inducement to visit Belgium—not only to see my aunt, but to see some one else. Have you forgotten that Bertrand de Volnay is there?’

'Confession is good for the soul, young lady,' he answers, laughingly, with a comical expression on his face, 'is it not?' and he looks over my head at some person behind me.

I start and turn round, and meet my guardian's eyes. But only for an instant. In the next my glance droops, and my hands grow like lumps of ice, and as I put one out towards a scent-bottle that lies on the table, it falls inadvertently on Jack's palm.

'Pearl, are you going to be ill?—your little paw is as cold as death!' he cries, as he takes both my hands and begins to rub and pat them into warmth.

While the operation goes on, Sir Galahad stands apparently watching it with a vacant stare. He says not a word, but champs away at the end of his moustache—a habit of his when he is either annoyed or sorry. Miss Græme, having rid herself of the visitors, recalls Jack to her side by a potent lifting and lowering of her lashes, and, sinking wearily into my seat, I take up my volume and pretend to be deeply immersed in its pages.

Pretence it is indeed! The words dance and reel before my vision, and my brain feels all dizzy, as if the vertical rays of a tropical sun were scorching it. This is the effect that a pair of blue eyes have upon me—eyes that I *feel* are upon me, trying to read my heart; but *that* is a sealed book to them for the future. No, never again shall those eyes discover how dear their owner is to me. Yet I am pained that he heard me say what I did about Bertrand, for it is no reason, because he is deceitful—because he has made of me a foolish, senseless toy, to be taken up and put down at his will—that I should thus deliberately sear my conscience with a falsehood. True, I can never pardon or forget the slight he has put upon me, and pride will strengthen me to keep him at arm's length.

At arm's length!—and already he is sitting beside me, holding my hand tightly in his.

'Pearl!'

Now 'Pearl,' to my taste, is not an especially pretty name, yet Sir Galahad's voice makes it sound so—more particularly when he murmurs it low and softly, as if it were a sort of uncontrollable whisper from his heart.

I have made up my mind to preserve an adamantine demeanour towards him, so I just answer, for mere courtesy's sake, 'Yes,' in a curt tone, and without lifting my eyes off my page, while I quickly draw my hand out of his clasp. I punish myself severely by doing this, but no matter, for I hope I am punishing him a little as well, for being so mean as to backbite my complexion before that horrid Miss Græme.

Of course he is mortified, but he does not resent my behaviour by a natural ebullition of temper. I believe he has all the attributes of the Army of Martyrs—patience inexhaustible, nobility, and resignation,—and so he returns good for evil.

'Pearl, darling!'

I turn upon him viciously, and if the wrath I dart upon him could kill, my guardian would be a dead man.

'Not *your* darling!' I flare out scornfully, with a firm inward conviction that his darling is that white mass of flesh yonder, with the big rolls of yellow hair gleaming up in the *demi-jour* light.

Sir Galahad winces at my contemptuous tone, and his mouth takes a sorrowful curve.

'Not *my* darling, I know,' he says, close to my ear. 'Forgive me, Pearl, for having forgotten that.'

'It doesn't much matter,' I reply, half relenting and half sulky. 'I am no one's darling, but I can manage to exist notwithstanding.'

'Child, don't be so strange, so *hard*!' he says, plaintively.

Then I bristle up again with the energy of a dozen porcupines, and fling sharp arrows at him.

'And do not *you* be so double-faced, so unmanly! I am going away soon, Mr Haviland—perhaps we shall never, never meet again!' And at this terrible thought my eyes brim over with tears, but I dash them away impatiently, and do not mind much that he sees them. 'And until I go, please leave me in peace.'

'Leave you in peace! You cannot surely mean that you desire me not to speak to you?'

'I wish you to leave me in peace, and not speak *of* me,' I

whimper out, the memory of my wrong pressing so heavily upon me that I feel I could scream ; but the vicinity of Miss Græme is to me an all-powerful restraint.

‘ I never do speak of you to a soul. Pearl, you are often unkind and unjust to me, but, whatever faults I may possess to offend you, you surely cannot believe me guilty of depreciating one who I—but never mind. I am so hurt at your injustice, your cruel thoughts of me, that it is the best that I should mind your behest and leave you.’ And suiting the action to the word he rises to go.

I long to seize the end of his coat and pull him down to his seat again, but a sense of maidenly decorum prevents me. Still I cannot resist throwing up a little imploring look. He and I must part one of these days, but let us part friends. There must be something magnetic in my black eyes, for he changes his mind and resumes his chair. My heart beats so fast that I know he can hear its pulsations ; and as I stoop to pick up a handkerchief I have purposely let fall, I cannot resist a small sensation of triumph breaking out in a smile on my lip ; but triumph is not the only feeling in my breast, there is a delicious content, an inexplicable fulness of happiness that always comes to me hand in hand with my guardian.

Simultaneously he and I look at one another, and simultaneously our eyelids droop ; but I have seen that a hot red spot burns on his cheek, and I feel that I am stifling for air. I jump up hastily, and grope my way in a sort of mental fog and blindness to the balcony—the same balcony in which I let my head drop on to Mr Fleming’s shoulder one summer night, not so very long ago, with the chaste moon and the twinkling stars silent witnesses of my folly. Now there is red and white-striped canvas enclosing it, and huge boxes of flowers around, sending up a rare and subtle fragrance. I lean against the wall that hides me from the occupants of the drawing-room, and, shutting my eyes, I try to recover the breath and serenity that have deserted me.

‘ Pearl ! ’

I know the voice, I listen with still closed eyes and a throbbing pulse, and I cannot help being glad that it sounds so near.

‘Did you hear that I had spoken unkindly of you?’

I nod my head in acquiescence.

‘And you believed it?—you believed me to be such a miserable scoundrel, such a deceitful wretch, as to utter one word derogatory to you?’

I shrug my shoulders, as though I were still doubtful, but I begin to think that I have been absurdly unjust to him. Still my wicked temper will not allow me to acknowledge it.

‘Pearl, can you harbour such resentment against me when I swear to you, on my word of honour, that never on any occasion have I spoken one syllable regarding you that I should be ashamed to say *to* you? Little one, we have known each other some time now, and, even if you hate me, you surely give me credit for honour and truth?’

‘Yes,’ I answer, but in a trepid tone, which cannot be satisfactory to him, though he accepts it meekly for want of a warmer one.

‘Are you angry with me still?’

‘No,’ another monosyllable drawled out with languor and indifference.

‘Is it really to see Bertrand de Volnay that you desire this visit to Belgium?’

‘No, no!—a thousand times no!’ I cry, decidedly and impatiently, and in my natural accents.

‘Open your eyes, then, and let me read in them whether you are telling the truth.’

I obey him.

‘Give me your hand in ratification of peace.’

I put it out slowly and hesitatingly, but his look and his touch thrill through me, and I shiver on this burning July afternoon.

‘Pearl, *dearest!*’

I listen, and do not rebuke him.

CHAPTER XIX.

CIRCEAN WILES.

‘ And draw them all along, and flow
 To join the brimming river,
 For men may come, and men may go,
 But I go on for ever ! ’

IT seems to me that any anatomist of human nature would find an ample and interesting study in Miss Græme’s piscatory proclivities. It is curious to watch her throw her line and catch her victims, with the golden bait of her hair and the glitter of her hazel eyes. My cousin Jack is the last fish that has fallen into her net, where he flounders hopelessly and helplessly, and a sorry specimen he is of her skill, for all the heartiness and life that characterised him on his advent in Curzon Street have vanished, leaving him a melancholy resemblance to a pulse plant—half human, half vegetable. Miss Græme’s marvellous tendency to flirtation always reminds me of Tennyson’s ‘ Brook.’

‘ For men may come, and men may go,
 But I go on for ever ! ’

Jack’s utter devotion to her has been but the perfume of a wild flower that she has carelessly crushed out under her foot. His heart is like the bean in the old nursery tale. Hope had taken root in it, and grew so rapidly that in the course of a very few weeks Giant Fancy has built a very big castle on the top ; but I predict that disappointment, sour-visaged beldame as she is, will come with a curtal axe and hew down both beanstalk and edifice at one fell blow.

Miss Græme and Jack stand now on the broad balcony, and apparently heed my neighbourhood as little as though I were ‘ nothing ’—not even an unsightly speck on the face of the earth, which they fancy was only created to be a stage for their mimic loves and disputes.

I quietly watch from my seat the tender glamour of the evening sky as it falls upon Jack’s head, while he gazes in a

rapt sort of fashion at his goddess. The London world is unusually still. The aristocrats of this region are evidently amusing themselves elsewhere, and scarce the sound of a wheel meets the ears. The deep red sunset gleams through the leaves of the parasites that adorn the balcony, and falls in chequers of light and shade on the floor. My cousin has undisguised admiration written on his plastic features.

‘How lovely you are, Mimi,’ poor Jack murmurs ; and he is right. No one, not even the most fastidious, could gainsay it, for she *is* lovely—lovely with Hebe’s face and Aphrodite’s form, as she stands close beside him, with her silks and laces, and a faint perfume of wood-violets, that she always wears, mingling with the fragrance of mignonette and heliotrope that steals up around.

‘Cannot you think of anything more original to say? Everyone tells me that!’ she retorts, with consummate conceit, her dainty upper lip curving scornfully, as though she wholly and utterly disdained flattery.

But she is a specious deceit, a living falsehood, for all the while she knows that she worships flattery ; it is meat and drink to her soul, hydrogen and oxygen, and she would starve and die without it.

‘Yes, but they do not *feel* it as I do!’ Jack says, passionately—*very* passionately, with his face beaming, and growing crimson and animated. Then he whitens suddenly, and bites his lips in mortification of spirit, for she turns abruptly from him, with a visible shrug of her big fair shoulders. Now Miss Græme is certainly not given to be sceptical of any admiration avowed to her, but even if it were so, were she humble and modest, or obtuse, she could scarcely doubt that the profession of it in this particular case is gospel truth—plain and unvarnished. Baby eyes might almost read the passion that shows itself in every line of Jack’s boyish countenance. If he were as mute as a mouse, Miss Græme could not fail to discern the burning eloquence in the limpid depths of his eyes.

The red shadow of the cloud above deepens over the pair, and the brilliancy of the summer sunset has pretty nearly died away—only just a warm glow comes touching up the heads of the lovers—for such I suppose they are—with a brighter gold.

‘Mimi, my darling ! my love ! speak to me !’ Jack implores, in a voice in which trills and tremors and shakes predominate. He has lost his head as well as his heart, and can no more control himself from speaking the love that has possessed him than he can thrust that love, senseless and absurd though it may be, out of his breast. He puts out a hand—a Cathcart hand, beautifully white, with long, slender fingers and cameo nails—and it settles down timidly on her cream-coloured sleeve.

‘Oh ! what am I to say ?’ she asks, with everything that is mellifluous gone out of her accents ; a harsh, cold tone pervades them, and she almost jerks her arm away, as if his touch was repulsive to her, and polluted her silken sheen. But Jack is all astray—passion has made him as blind as a bat.

‘Say ? Why, say that you love me ! Say that you will be my wife !’

Even the glimmer of the fading light is dying fast, so I strain my eyes. I am curious to see this strange Idyll enacted and ended, an Idyll with a heroine who is so thoroughly flesh and blood, a heroine with a splendid physique and a material soul. Miss Græme is too practical to believe that

‘ Kind hearts are more than coronets,
And simple faith than Norman blood.’

She is anti-romantic, from the yellow crown of her head to the feet that are shod in velvet and spangles. She opens her mouth into a small oval, and her hazel eyes dilate as she stares at him while he speaks.

‘Say to me, Mimi, that your words and looks have all been meant, that you are true, as true as the love that I bear you. And, Mimi, say that I may take you into my arms, and know that you are really my own.’

And with that Jack tries to draw her nearer him. He wants to feel that it *is* a beautiful woman, living and breathing and loving that stands beside him, and not a statue, cold, hard and immovable, as she appears now. He might take a rock to his heart, and it would respond as warmly as Miss Græme does at this moment. She is beautiful, with the beauty of a dozen Circes. Some might compare her to Cleopatra, some to Delilah, or Messalina ; but to me she is like Jael, the wife

of Heber the Kenite. I can picture her in my mind's eye—stately and gracious in bearing, a smile wreathing her scarlet mouth, while with a steady, unflinching hand she drives the nail into her sleeping victim's temple.

Jack's veins stand out in knotty cords, his eyes kindle, and a hot spot glows on either cheek. For the nonce all this is either life or death to him. Miss Græme is by him—her tall figure drawn up to its fullest height, her perfect countenance impassive as stone. The opal and coral tints of her face are a marvellous mask, and it would be a shrewd eye that could detect through them the thoughts that pass through her mind, the machinations of her scheming brain. In the dim light she looks like a marble image with chiselled and faultless features, on which there is none of the passion that my cousin craves. The only expression she wears is one of intense boredom. Jack sees it, even through the rose-coloured spectacles that Cupid has lent him; and he evidently suffers, for his face falls. I move away from my seat—I have had more than enough of this scene; but Miss Græme's peculiar little low laugh arrests me. Sharp and biting as a wintry blast, and sarcastic withal, it rings on the quiet evening, and I can see my cousin flinch from its sound just as if it was a death-blow.

'Might I ask if you are indulging in the romance that is often born of an hour like this, or are you foolish?'

'Foolish!'

'Yes, terribly, absurdly foolish. Why, what on earth can I have ever said or done to lead you into the belief that I was in love? Must I be guilty of the folly simply because you happen, like a good many of your sex, to admire me? I am not vain, neither am I of a particularly susceptible nature. And if you have really and truly rushed into the error of fancying that I cared for you enough to marry you, why, you possess far more conceit than I gave you credit for.'

She says all this slowly and deliberately—just as if she were Jael, stab, stab until she kills a man's heart, or renders it so bitter and doubtful of woman's truth and worth that he had best be killed himself. Her voice is mocking, yet curiously monotonous—real feeling does not exist to give inflection to it. Jack must surely see that she is a coquette, and heartless,

and worse than heartless—soulless. But he does not give her up at once—a struggle is before him, in which he will come off vanquished, with lacerated feelings. He staggers up feebly against the ivy-covered pilaster, and gazes at her aghast, breathlessly, an ashy pallor usurping the usually bright tints of his face, and creeping up far to his temples; but his violet eyes are all aflame—they burn in his sore distress more vividly even than before.

‘Fancied you cared for me! Why, I could have staked all my hopes of heaven on it! I could have wagered my existence that you were true and pure and good as gold—that you were a woman fit to be loved—nay, worshipped—with a man’s whole heart—that you were a woman a man would glory in having for his wife—his all!—but *now!*’

He leans forward with a flushed face and grasps her two white hands, on which many a priceless jewel glitters. The grasp is evidently an ungentle one, for she winces and contracts her eyebrows under it; but he is in no humour to heed her pain or her wrath, and he holds her tight and firm. He never thinks that what he wants to hold her with are the rosy chains of love, and not the iron hand of an unwilling captivity. As long as he holds her thus he is not altogether hopeless.

‘Mimi! you must be saying all this to tease me! I am in no mood for joking or play; for God’s sake be serious for a moment!’

He pauses to gain breath and strength, and I can hear his heart beat.

The French clock in the drawing-room chimes the hour. It is getting late—close upon the time when Sir Galahad usually comes home to dress for dinner. Miss Græme starts as the sound meets her ear. It is not likely that she wishes my guardian to find her in a *tête-à-tête* with anyone.

Jack’s love and suffering are *nil*—they do not touch her a whit more than the rain would a stone. She shakes off all feeling, all commiseration (if she ever had any for him), as easily as she would crush a harmless insect that chanced to crawl in her path.

‘It is getting late, and I think we had best defer the subject under discussion for another opportunity,’ she says, in a

quiet, matter-of-fact tone ; and she makes a step towards the window.

But Jack is grown desperate now. He clutches hold of the skirt of her dress, heedless of, or indifferent to, the fact that his profane touch is spoiling one of Madame Elise's best and most artistic efforts. The cream-coloured silk is all rumpled and crumpled up in his fingers, but he arrives at his object—he detains her, *nolens volens*,—and if she parts from him, she will part with a scalloped flounce as well.

‘Another moment ! This may be child's play to you, but it is death to me ! Mimi, only tell me that you *do* love me a little, and I'll let you go !’

His features look all wan and haggard, and his glance is very wistful as he literally hangs on her response. She sends one angry look covertly towards the creases he is making, then she smiles up in his face—a beaming, bewildering smile. In this moment it was Socrates who was right when he said that beauty was worth more than all the letters of recommendation in the world. Jack succumbs to that smile. He forgets all she has said, the glimpse she has given him of her inner nature has faded right out of his mind ; he only remembers that he adores her, and that she smiles up at him. He releases her skirt, and smoothes it reverently, and clasps the tips of the fingers she holds out ; then he kisses them.

‘Oh ! Jack, Jack ! don't you know that one can't wear one's heart on one's sleeve ? Why torture yourself and me like this ?’

She glides into the room with her stealthy step, and Jack looks up at the sky. A solitary star twinkles right overhead, and by its light I can see that Circe has him firm in her toils—the bean-stalk is growing still. His violet eyes dance, and he whistles an opera-bouffe air unconsciously in the fulness of his heart.

CHAPTER XX.

JACK'S BUBBLE BURSTS.

'She was his life,
The ocean to the river of his thoughts,
Which terminated all.'

I HAVE been looking over a copy of Byron, and I pick out the above appropriate little morsel for the benefit of my cousin Jack, who is the only other thing besides the furniture in the drawing-room. When I put him into the neuter gender thus, I do so quite advisedly, for ever since his acquaintance with Miss Græme, which has now extended over a period of some weeks, he has completely thrown off all the independence and energy of a man, and subsided into that uninteresting and somewhat despicable of human beings, a sighing swain.

He is sitting now in the middle of the room, in what I should fancy to be far from a comfortable position. Very upright, and with an utter disregard to the luxurious cushions that invite him to ease and repose, while melancholy marks him for her own. His eyes have that particularly rapid look that eyes usually assume when the gaze is apt to get absorbed in some one particular yellow dot or crimson speck in the carpet, or on the wall, and he does not even notice my pointed quotation, save by the heaving of a loud sigh, which, instead of exciting womanly sympathy and commiseration on my side, impels me to get up and shake him well, in the vain hope of dislodging Miss Græme's ponderous image from the stronghold of his heart.

'Jack!' I say, impetuously, and with the frankness that our close consanguinity warrants, 'what on earth has come over you? You are not the tenth part of an inch as nice as you were when we first met!'

Love, mighty, omnipotent love, has rendered him as meek as a lamb, as gentle as a dove, so, instead of resenting my remark, he answers only by a sad and feeble smile, that barely parts his well-cut lips. I have a suspicion that the smile is

only put on to hide a quiver, so I sit down by his side, and begin, very softly,—

‘You are the only relation that I know in the world, Jack! And brief as our acquaintance has been, I seem to care for you as a brother, and I cannot bear to see you look so thoroughly miserable and out of sorts.’

He gives another spasmodic attempt at a sickly smile, while he takes a piece of my hair and deliberately drags it out of curl. I know that the action is merely the result of an absent mind, and I bear the pain he inflicts without a groan, like a martyr.

‘You are a dear little thing, Pearl, and I am really grateful for your sympathy! I *am* rather unhappy, but I daresay I shall get over it some day!’ he avows, in a guppy sort of voice, as if he were manfully struggling with a ball in his throat, and the white lids of his violet eyes, and the muscles all round his mouth, twitch funnily. I eye him curiously as he goes through these facial changes, regarding him as a specimen of misplaced affection, and wondering whether my physiognomy undergoes similar evolutions after one of those terrible sparring matches which have become frequent lately, alas! between Sir Galahad and myself. Then I suddenly recollect that I should lose no time in reflection, as I may not have another favourable chance of administering comfort or advice to my poor misguided cousin.

‘Come, Jack, tell me all about it,’ I coax.

‘It’ is a very small and indefinite mode of designating so substantial and majestic a being as Miss Græme; but love, monopoliser of everything, comprehends at once, there being but one he, she, or it in Cupid’s vocabulary. Jack, ever since the golden-haired syren lured him to her side, has manifestly fallen at her feet in a helpless mass—metaphorically speaking. For about a month she was the honey that sweetened every hour of his life—during the last weeks that honey has turned to gall. She has grown hard and obdurate; she freezes him by her glances, and vouchsafes to her slave scarce a civil word. It is no wonder that his honest young heart is sorely tried.

‘You see, I cannot make her out at all,’ he says, with a weary, puzzled look, like that of a school-boy when trying to solve a difficult problem in Euclid.

'Who can understand her?' I ask. Miss Græme, to me, is a sphinx, an impossible enigma, a human spider, whose sole occupation consists in weaving entangling webs for mankind in general, and my guardian in particular.

'You know, Pearl, that at first I seemed to be all in all to her, and now I am simply—*nothing!*' Jack exclaims, passionately. 'If I speak to her, she snubs me; if I look at her, her glance chills me; and then, Pearl, I am jealous—so horribly jealous—that I feel I could be worked up to *anything!*'

Jack, when he says this, looks just like my notion of Othello, except that his physiognomy is not black. My blood curdles as, in fancy, I see Miss Græme's fair white face all blue and squeezed up under a great big pillow.

'Who is Iago?' I question, eagerly, and a little irreverently, since my cousin cannot have an insight to my thoughts.

He either does not heed my words, or else does not understand them, but he goes on, savagely pushing his curls further and further off his forehead, until his hair assumes the aspect of a wig on the point of tumbling off behind.

'I feel as if I could *crush* him,' he murmurs, elongating the verb crush until it sounds portentous. 'I could kick him, or even kill him at times.'

'Who?' I ask, in a whisper, frightened at his threat, and yet with a certain unhealthy gratification in my mind that an old-fashioned, bloody drama of love and jealousy is going to be enacted, to break through the prosy, matter-of-fact existence of modern life; and I picture to myself vividly Mr Talbot's effeminate form all crushed and mutilated by contact with Jack's broad shoulders and long muscular limbs.

'Who?—why who should it be but that fellow Haviland?' falls like an avalanche upon me, freezing me up. Inwardly I am all trembling, but I try to speak in my usually firm voice.

'And why, in the name of all that is unheard of and absurd, are you jealous of him?' I fancied that Mr Talbot was your rival.'

'Talbot!—phew! She does not care a snap of the finger for that whey-faced little puppy. Oh, no, it is "Robert"' (mimicking her tone)—'always Robert! I hate the very

sound of the name!' he cries, angrily, kicking viciously at the leg of a velvet fauteuil, in the imagination that Sir Galahad's shins are being molested. 'Pearl, do you not see it all?—do you not see that Talbot, I, and in fact everyone that she succeeds in making egregious fools of, are only taken in tow for awhile, just to play off against Haviland; and then, to evince her preference for him, we are thrown aside like so much worthless rubbish. Don't you note the expression of her eyes whenever she turns to him?—a rapt, fond look, that *I* would lay down my life to get from her,' he says, vehemently.

I listen silently, and with a sinking and aching heart. Jealousy of Miss Græme has gnawed my soul in twain for a very long time past, but with occasional lulls. Now it recommences its ravages once more, yet I can hardly bring myself to believe that my guardian can be so double-faced that he can love *her*.

'Oh! Pearl, my dear child, if you were only old enough to understand my feelings!' Jack exclaims, as though the passion he felt had lengthened the one or two years that is the difference between our ages into ten—'if you knew how madly I care for her, how I dote on her beautiful face, her golden hair, till I feel that if she throws me over my heart will break!'

'Poor Jack!—poor boy!' I ejaculate, inwardly. It is dreadful to see so much feeling, so much sincerity—rare articles in the world's market—wasted—wasted like this! 'Pearls before swine!' I mutter, angrily, with an utter disregard of the uncomplimentary comparison to Miss Græme. 'Jack, you are a fool! Cannot you *feel* that she is not worth a thought, much less the pain you are suffering for her sake?—that, in spite of the wonderful beauty that has bewitched you, she is only a cold, heartless woman, who would just give you a stone when you begged for bread? You are lavishing your heart on a myth, you are worshipping a creature of your own creation, and not Miss Græme. Be a man, Jack, and forget her!'

Of course, as it always happens, advice gratis is never appreciated. Jack, in lieu of gushing over with gratitude for my trouble in teaching him the path he should go, frowns at

me till his rather undefined brows meet in a curve just over the bridge of his nose, and his lips repudiate the kindness of my intention in advising him, and take up the cudgels in warm defence of his absent inamorata.

‘Women are always so ready to be spiteful to one another. I might have known that you would seize the first opportunity to run poor Mimi down, instead of censuring the real offender. You are just like the rest of your sex,’ he informs me, with a little curl of his mouth.

‘And who may the real offender be?’ I ask, half offended, but letting curiosity overpower a feeling of injustice that his words have created in my breast.

‘Why, Pearl, I believe you are growing obtuse. Who should it be but Haviland? It is his fault that Mimi’ (he dwells on the name with an intonation suggestive of every tense of the verb *amo*) ‘has to turn the cold shoulder to everyone. Fleming told me that Haviland disapproved of Talbot’s attentions, and Mimi told me herself that “Robert” was displeased at her being so much seen with me.’

‘I do not believe it,’ I reply, stoutly. Love and pride are both up in arms within me; and besides this, there is a voice whispering to my heart that my guardian is traduced, that he owns truth and rectitude. ‘I am sure that Mr Haviland does not care whom Miss Græme is with. It is only a game she is playing to try to entrap him. Listen to me, Jack, and exert your reason. You know that Mr Talbot is not to be mentioned in comparison with Mr Haviland personally, and that Blechington is not half so grand a place as Glen-thorn; and you know, too, that you, in spite of your good looks and your warm heart, are not really so good a match in a worldly sense as Mr Haviland. Miss Græme is wide awake; she has a sordid, mercenary soul, and a keen knowledge of the best catch!’

The door flies open before the words are quite out of my mouth, and Miss Græme walks in. By the flush on her fair face, by the thunder that sits on her brow, I can read the fact that she has been listening before she entered. I turn away, and take up a book, and Jack, in his excessive nervousness, stumbles and upsets his chair.

‘I have not an idea what person you were discussing,

Pearl, but your voice was vulgarly loud, and your expressions most ill-chosen and unladylike,' she says to me, in accents of concentrated anger.

I bite my lips hard to keep down my indignation at her mode of addressing me, but, not caring for open warfare, I am silent. Turning from me with a haughty air, she speaks to Jack, just as if she were letting little lumps of ice fall out of her mouth.

'I was not aware that you had done us the honour of so early a call. It is only one o'clock now.'

'If you had known I was here you would not have come in, I suppose?' he asks, passionately.

'Perhaps not! I do not care to interrupt cousinly confidences, especially when they are so full of malice and vituperation,' she drawls out disdainfully, with a gleam of wrath shot in my direction; but it falls harmless on me, though my cousin shrinks and withers under the flash.

I only long to pinch her into some show of feeling, even if genuine feeling be denied her. She has seated herself at the farthest end of the room in a regal attitude, and Jack, love-sick Jack, forgets all his catalogue of grievances that he recounted to me half-an-hour ago, while he devours her every word and look, feeding himself greedily and copiously on a noisome poison which *must* result in the death of any good opinion he may at present hold of our sex.

'Why were you so cold to me at the ball last night?' he questions her reproachfully, and yet tenderly, in a voice that would assuredly soften most women, but his big block of ice remains intact under its influence. 'You would not dance with me, and, when I waited a full hour in the ante-room just to say "Good night," you swept by without a word or a glance. You are cruel, Mimi!'

'Am I? You only share the same fate as the others!' she replies, with contempt. My blood boils fast, the dignity of us Cathcarts is being invaded. I pretend to read, but in truth I listen eagerly, in the hope of hearing Jack put her down to her proper level, but I listen in vain.

Jack stands, not erect, but with a little stoop, his eyes lifted up imploringly, his white hand twisting the corner of his handkerchief. Passion has reduced him to a deplorable state of

servility ; he has no stamina left to crush down the yoke he wears, and he only grows more humble and deprecatory as his deity waxes loftier in her manner, and doubly superb in her scornfulness.

‘But, unlike the others, you make a dreadful fuss about nothing. Of course, I cannot be expected to be civil to *everyone*.’

This last in a grandiose style, which is a mixture of indolence and contempt.

‘It is only very lately that you have begun to class me amongst *everyone*,’ he says, sorrowfully. ‘Oh! Mimi, what have I done that you should treat me like this?’ And his beautiful lips are pressed frantically to her hand, while his boyish features work with undisguised emotion.

She does not seem to pity him a whit, although she never tries to draw away her hand—the fond and lingering pressure of his quivering mouth is a pleasant incense to her beauty and power over men’s hearts. Her hazel eyes look out at him with the cold light of an autumnal morning, and, in spite of his kiss ; her cheek never changes a shade.

‘This is about the twentieth time you have thought fit to reproach me—within one week! Why *won’t* you understand that you have deluded yourself—that I cannot be changed towards you,—since we are now as we were at the very beginning—simple acquaintances?’

She rises slowly after this, trailing her long silk skirt after her, and a bunch of violets she wears in her bodice falls to the ground. Jack covertly picks it up and thrusts it into the breast of his coat. To him their fragrance is far more precious than frankincense or myrrh, or all the gums of Araby put together. He follows in her wake just like a spaniel, but only to be kicked again.

‘Tell me my fate at once, Mimi. Do not play with my feelings—do not torture me like this, for God’s sake!’ he pleads hard.

Byron lies before me, and he says like Jack, but in more flowery language,

‘Better to sink beneath the shock
Than moulder piecemeal on the rock.’

Miss Græme likes the process of mouldering on the rock best, for she only answers with a yawn, that she never attempts to conceal,—

‘You knew your fate long ago ; it is like other men’s—to love and to suffer.’ And she laughs.

‘Mimi ! how *can* you act like this ? Have you forgotten all the past already?—have the protestations, the kisses—’

‘Hush !’

Jack, in the overwhelming tide of his bitter complaints, and in the bewildering memory of past bliss, has forgotten for a minute the honour and discretion of a true gentleman—he has let slip in oblivion the rhyme,—

‘He that kisses a pretty girl and goes and tells his mother,
He never deserves to be kissed by another.’

It is true that I am not his mother, but I suppose the rhyme applies all the same, for Miss Græme’s equanimity is evidently very much disturbed by the untimely revelation. It is no use my trying to read, for Byron’s poems are Hebrew.

‘I *will* know the reason you are so altered towards me. I have committed no crime to merit the change, and I suppose I am not more ill-looking than when we first met,’ my cousin says, warmly, and, to my intense satisfaction, a little sharply as well, while he throws a glance at a neighbouring mirror.

No, there is nothing ill-looking about him—of this he may rest satisfied. Drawn up to his full height, with his face flushed, and with an angry eye, he stands before her. The memory of the past tenderness, the recollection of the kisses he referred to, have had the effect of strengthening him. Miss Græme feels the difference in his manner and accents, and, like all women of her calibre, she waxes more gentle and more amiable beneath a high hand. Her tone is quite humble as she says,—

‘I am not altered, only Robert does not approve of my *affiche*-ing myself with anyone.’

‘Pray, why ? If the man you *affiche* yourself with is your affianced husband ?’

I perceive at once that Jack looks upon himself in the light of her ‘future,’ and that he never dreams how widely asunder Miss Græme’s and his ideas are on the subject ; but

she does not avow them—she only temporises, afraid that an open breach may risk another indiscreet speech from incensed Jack.

‘I fancy that Robert is not very anxious for me to marry. You see, he has grown accustomed to having me at Glenthorn, and the place would seem dull to him without me.’

‘And to gratify his desire for cheerfulness, you do not care a rush how you spoil my life. Is that it, Mimi? Now, listen to this—I do not believe that Haviland ever troubles his head about you, and that, instead of objecting to your marrying, I think he would be glad to get some of the responsibility off his shoulders. *One* ward is sufficient for him to look after, especially when that ward appears to take up a good deal of his time and his attention;’ and from under my eyelids I see him make a gesture denoting that I am the being in question.

‘Bravo, Jack!’ I exclaim, mentally.

Once upon his legs, his oratory does not fail him—it runs on; he

‘Chatters over stony ways
In little sharps and trebles,’

like a river, unmindful of his auditor’s expression of surprise at his effrontery. To such truth as Jack tells her Miss Græme is unused.

‘But the real fact of the case is that you want to marry Haviland and his broad acres. You lay yourself out to flirt with other men in the idea of goading him to the point. By displaying a marked preference for him at the sacrifice of other people’s happiness, you hope to catch him; but the hope is delusive. Mark my words, Miss Græme—Haviland may die unmarried, but if you were the last woman in the world, he would never make *you* his wife!’

Jack is not over-courteous in his most righteous indignation. He feels that he has been wounded in the best feelings of his nature; that his genuine love has been mercilessly trampled in the dust; that he has been made a plaything of an hour—a mere tool in the unscrupulous hands of the woman who, pale with anger, stares at him in amazement. I respect him for speaking out, even at the expense of losing her liking for ever.

‘Mr Temple, you are no gentleman. You forget yourself

abominably!' is all she can gasp out, though, were eloquence given her, a volley of wrathful reproach would issue from her lips, judging by the expression of her features and the convulsive movement of her white hands.

'No, I do not forget myself. If I have spoken truth, I have every right to do so. No being on earth should play with a man's heart and then tear it to pieces, just to serve a purpose—and an unworthy purpose too, for it *is* unworthy of you to try to entrap Haviland.'

A shriek, stifled yet shrill, makes me jump off my seat and upset Byron ignominiously on the floor. Miss Græme laughs and cries alternately, and clutching hold of Jack's hand, she digs her shell-like nails into it in her hysteria, until he winces under the pain. I cannot help thinking there is method in her madness, but I say nothing, and content myself with holding the salts so pertinaciously close to her dainty nose that she recovers her senses *volens volens*. There is a dead silence, during which she gradually recovers composure and dignity; while Jack, abashed at his conduct, and a little regretful perhaps that he has angered her whom his soul loves, awaits the result with varying colour and deprecatory eyes.

'You have insulted me,' she says, in a low, hard voice that is relentless—'you have spoken to me as no one has ever dared to do before, and from this time forth, Mr Temple, you and I meet as strangers. Never again will I acknowledge you, if we live to the age of Methuselah!' And she sweeps with the manner of Medea out of the room.

Thus Jack's beautiful bubble bursts! Up to the very roots Miss Græme has wrenched his adored beanstalk. He looks at me aghast, and I laugh. Presently he laughs too. The scene has been so melodramatic, and the sequel so common-place. He is young, and youth is generally brave under affliction.

'I believe you were about right, little one, when you said she was heartless, and not worth caring about.'

I endorse the sentiment with a sapient nod. Jack extracts the bunch of violets from his breast-pocket and tosses them carelessly over to me. I make them into a tiny funereal wreath, and my cousin and I lay it reverently (in imagination) on the coffin that contains the ashes of his dead love.

CHAPTER XXI.

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN.

‘Duty is far more than love—it is the upholding law through which the weakest become strong.’

CURZON STREET, the mimic stage where our farces and dramas have been enacted for the past months, is a changed spot. With the exception of Mrs Haviland, my guardian and myself, all the *dramatis personæ* have vanished from the scenes. Mr Fleming, since he and I swore eternal friendship, has never put in an appearance. My cousin Jack’s handsome face has been absent ever since the *coup d’état* by which Miss Græme dismissed him ; and Miss Græme herself carries on her war on men’s hearts day and night, never missing a flower-show or kettledrum, dinner or ball. Her beauty wears ill through late hours and a chronic condition of gaiety ; and her features have on them a new expression—one in which can be detected both discontent and querulousness. I pursue the tenor of my way, though it is not an ‘even’ one. My life is like a swing—one minute I go up, up, up, and the next moment I go down, down, down, just as it pleases Sir Galahad to treat me. Breakfast is over, and a little listlessly I saunter out of the room.

‘Can you give me half-an-hour, Pearl ? I should like a few words with you,’ and Sir Galahad opens the door of his writing-room, and ushers me in. I drop into a chair opposite his, with the oaken table keeping us at a respectful distance from one another. It is the first time that we have been *tête-à-tête* since the balcony episode, for I have tried to avoid him, feeling that it is best for me to do so. I love him so much, and I never attempt to deny the fact to myself, as I used to do in the beginning. No more quibbling with conscience ; no more palliations of the wrong I am doing Bertrand. I love my guardian, love him with all my hot, passionate heart, and I shall love him to the end ; waking or sleeping his face is ever before me, I hear his voice whispering in my ear, I feel his touch on my hand, and

I know that I am his, absolutely and for ever. An indefinite feeling, a mysterious something draws me towards him, whether I will or not, and helpless as a child, I cannot resist it, though there is immeasurable pain mixed with the happiness that I feel when he is near. Now I sit quiet, but content, ineffably content, for we two are together, and we two are *alone*, and in 'such joy a stranger intermeddleth not.' I wait patiently until he speaks. What does it matter to me that he is silent, so long as my eyes can see him? And yet, when he speaks, I should like him to speak for ever.

'Have you really made up your mind to go to Belgium, Pearl?' he asks me, with more anxiety in his tone than the occasion warrants.

'Yes, I think so,' I answer, without even an attempt to check a sigh that rises up from the very depths of my heart.

'You do not reply as though the visit was a very pleasurable one to you,' he remarks.

'No; I *hate* going!' I tell him, impetuously and frankly. I am in a mood to speak my mind plainly and flatly. Everything in the world seems so full of shams and deceit that it is quite pleasant to feel oneself *true*.

'Then why on earth have you determined on going?' he exclaims.

I cannot well tell him that his criticism on my complexion was the original cause of the arrangement with Jack. It would be too absurd, too childish, so my vaunted palace of truth immediately melts away in a white lie.

'I go because I know that my aunt is anxious to have me with her,' I reply, trying to feel dutiful, but all the while I am cross and rebellious against the whole thing within.

'And so do *we* want you, Pearl!' And his voice has a volume of entreaty in it. I shake my head doubtfully, for a vision of Lady Clementina Dillon's sandy hair and red and white cheeks flashes across my brain.

'I am not wanted. I am no fair aristocrat,' I say, with forced scorn, biting my lip, but with intense mortification of spirit, as Miss Græme's conversation with my cousin recurs to me. Oh! why were the gods so obdurate as to deny me the sort of beauty that my guardian loves? I cry in bitterness; but the leopard cannot change his spots, nor I my skin.

'What induces you to make such a strange remark as that, Pearl?' he asks, with his eyes and mouth open in surprise.

'I was thinking about Lady Clementina Dillon, your divinity, Mr Haviland,' I say, calmly.

'Of *whom*?'

'Lady Clementina Dillon!' I reiterate, enunciating each letter of the patrician name slowly and distinctly, just as though I was learning to spell it.

'An interesting subject, truly, to think about!' he laughs.

I turn round abruptly in my chair so as to face him, and fix my gaze unflinchingly on his features. Can falsity and specious lies find a home in that breast when those eyes look out so faithful and so honest, with candour shining in their blue depths? But Lavater was a fool, and physiognomy is a fraud. I have found it so in Miss Græme's case, for who could divine that deceit lived beneath those pure and pearly tints—those hazel eyes, as holy as a Madonna's in some old cathedral aisle?

'Mr Haviland,' I commence, gravely, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, 'if there was anything for you to be ashamed of in your admiration of the lady in question, I could understand your laughing the subject off; but as she is *la crème de la crème*—' And I sneer, for her complexion is suggestive of cream splashed with strawberry-juice.

'I admire that gaunt, green-eyed woman, with the mien and gait of a Life Guardsman! Pearl, you must be dreaming or mad, to credit me with such atrocious taste!' he says, still laughing.

'I was dreaming, and I was mad too, perhaps; but I am awake now, and sane and reasonable enough to look at things as they *are*, and not as they seem,' I answer, like a philosopher.

My guardian rises from his seat, and walks round the table and stoops over me.

'Pearl, do not let us waste time or breath in discussing people in whom neither you nor I can take the slightest interest. Child, if you knew how thoroughly impervious I am to feminine attractions—how little they touch me—you would never credit things you hear, and which are probably said simply for your benefit. They might call me the man

with the marble heart, for I have never found the woman yet who could make it throb half as fast as it does when my ward is cruel and quarrels with me for nothing.' And he bends his head still lower and smiles into my face.

I soften at once. The fire of his glance melts the ice that encrusts me, and the sternness I have brought to my mouth relaxes.

'*Must* you go to Belgium, my little Pearl?'

'I am afraid so.'

'And for how long?'

I know that I ought to stay with my aunt until Bertrand takes me into his safe keeping; but ought is a terrible word. It is a painful prospect, and, with the traditional weakness of the flesh, I give up the project, and say, humbly,—

'Until Mrs Haviland and you will have me back again.'

'Until *you* choose to come *home* again, you mean,' he replies, with a decided stress on the word *home*.

No one but Sir Galahad would have put it in so delicate a way. It goes straight to my heart.

'If it was only my home!' I murmur.

'And is it not? Did not your father bequeath you to me?—and, having accepted the gift, are you not mine, and my home yours? Is not my argument an infallible one, Pearl?'

'It would be, if papa had given me to you without reservation, perhaps—if you had accepted me for better for worse, for richer for poorer,' I say, with a shy laugh.

'And I would have!—I would have!' he cries, seizing my two hands in his, and covering them with kisses. 'If you had only come to me unfettered!—mine to hold until death us did part! Oh! Pearl, little one, when I think of this I forget to be Christianly. I *hate* this Bertrand de Volnay to whom your life is pledged.'

'While my heart is dead to him,' I answer, yet angry with myself for not being able to keep the height and might, the enormous breadth and width, of my wickedness from Sir Galahad.

'Do you ever look forward, Pearl? Does it ever occur to you, that both you and this lover of yours are young, and that a long vista of years lies before you?—a terrible vista, in which indifference will hold the place of that soul-to-soul love that

should exist—or worse still, perhaps, than indifference—a contempt and dislike that you will be unable to control?’

‘Does my future ever occur to me, Mr Haviland? Oh, if you could read all that is in my mind when I let myself *think*! If you knew how often I wish myself dead!’ I cry, vehemently.

‘I cannot bring myself to believe that this marriage is a righteous piece of work; it seems to me solely a business arrangement—a simple desire on your father’s part to procure you the requisites of life,’ he says. ‘Pearl, you are going deliberately to God’s altar with a fearful falsehood tarnishing your soul and your lips. You are going to link yourself wholly and indissolubly to this man, with no single kindly feeling towards him in your breast, only for duty’s sake—only because you pledged yourself to him to alleviate your father’s anxiety. It is a mistaken sense of duty, Pearl, and your father, if he had lived, would never have permitted so unholy a marriage.’

If I could only bring myself to think this I might write to Bertrand and break the hateful tie that binds me; but Sir Galahad’s words are sophistry—a sophistry that I would fain believe, but I dare not. The scene is vivid before me now. Papa’s white face and glazing eyes, Bertrand’s firm clasp of my ice-cold hand, the gleam of the emerald hoop that was the evidence of my bondage. I feel that, if I were the one to break the chain that destiny has woven, remorse would embitter each hour of my existence.

‘Did your father like Monsieur de Volnay? Had he faith in him?’

‘Not such faith as he had in you,’ I answer. Papa’s words, ‘I had other hopes a little while ago. I trusted that some one else—one in whom I have faith infinite—would have fancied you,’ come into my head, and I remember the flush of wounded dignity that dyed my cheek at the very thought of being ‘fancied.’

‘Tell me, Pearl, would your father have given you to me? I, who am old in comparison with yourself, and a little hard and cold from contact with this wicked world?’

I turn away my head, that he may not see the light that his words have called up in my eyes. Old and hard and cold! My darling, my king, with his face so full of power and

feeling!—these tender lips, with their rare glorious smile! The words are dire desecration, to my thinking.

‘If I had only reached La Roche in time, Pearl, we might have been so happy now,’ he whispers.

‘*Might have been!*’ Sad, bitter words—words that appeal to every human heart like those other words, ‘*Too late.*’ The tears rush unbidden into my eyes, and I dash them quickly away with a trembling hand, and say, carelessly, but with a quiver in my tone,—

“If!” Mr Haviland. Don’t you know that if “ifs and ands were pots and pans,” that the world would be less full of misery than it is now? Retrospection is not cheerful work, my guardian. Let us change the theme.’

He is not angry at my light words, for he feels that they emanate from a bitter spirit.

‘To a theme that is equally cheerful to me. When do you go away from us, Pearl?’

‘On the fifteenth of next month. And please do not remind me of the date, if you have mercy in your soul.’

‘We are going back to Glenthorn on the first of August, and then I shall have you more to myself!’

‘Not with Miss Græme there, to watch and reprove us,’ I say, impatiently.

‘The desire of Mimi’s heart is on the eve of fulfilment, and she will grow softer and more amiable to her fellow-creatures, perhaps,’ he tells me, mysteriously.

‘The desire of her heart—what is it?’ I question, eagerly.

‘I will leave her the gratification of telling you all about it, Pearl.’ And he begins rummaging some papers and letters on the table to avoid the subject.

I leave him, and run against Miss Græme. She hurries past me and enters my guardian’s room, and bangs to the door, but not before I hear her say, in unusually loud and agitated accents,—

‘Robert, I have made up my mind—as you wish it, my answer is “Yes.”’

CHAPTER XXII.

ONE AUGUST EVE.

'This, this has thrown a serpent to my heart
While it overflowed with tenderness, with joy,
Now nought but gall is there and burning poison.'

'How happy the child looks, Robert!' Mrs Haviland says, eyeing me kindly. She has for the nonce abandoned her incessant knitting, and her plump white fingers lie placidly clasped in her lap, while her still, fair countenance beams effulgently a fulness of content. Tea is over at the premature hour of five P.M., that we may revel in a long summer's evening, undisturbed by material things, and I lean out of the window in an inelegant attitude, with my elbows resting on the sill and my two hands supporting my chin, while I take great long sniffs of the delicious Gloire de Dijon roses that poke their sweet faces right into mine.

The ripe August sun is flooding Glenthorn with a golden glory, and burnishing the tips of Sir Galahad's hair as he lies six feet two inches on the cool green sward hard by. I beam back a smile at Mrs Haviland, in answer to her remark regarding my blithe looks. I *am* happy—for a while I have put aside a good deal of the past, and all of the future, and I live for the present. Miss Græme, who is the exaggerated gnat whose petty but sharp stings so often endanger my mental equilibrium, is absent in London, and there is no distracting element to mar the peace and quiet that have reigned supreme for the twenty-four hours that have flown by in a sort of Midsummer's dream since our return home—except one bitter that mingles with the sweet—the memory of a mysteriousness in the camp of the Philistine just before we left. Three times the enemy was closeted in my guardian's study, and on the final occasion I chanced to cross her path just as she emerged from the door. She passed me by swiftly, with that peculiar gliding step which to me is so essentially catlike, but not before I had marked that her pure skin was mottled and stained

with tears, and her hazel eyes swollen-lidded. I have a strong leaven of curiosity bequeathed to me by my Mother Eve, and I wait impatiently till I can solve the above mystery.

'When it is so delicious out here, it is a marvel to me that people can bear to stay in the house,' Sir Galahad soliloquises, audibly.

I conclude that the term 'people' must be meant for me, since Mrs Haviland has been gone upstairs for some time, leaving me in solitary possession of the big drawing-room. 'People' would prefer being outside, but wait to be asked prettily, so I persist in inhaling the fragrance of the roses, and plucking off a few dead leaves from their stalks from my window, appearing as if I was deaf, or else impervious to the fact that a pair of blue eyes are impatiently watching my occupation.

'Won't you come out here, Pearl? It is *so* nice!'

At last I am invited, but I stop a minute or two to consider whether I will go or not. It certainly does seem 'nice.'

The sun has not quite gone down to his rest in the far west, but his eyes are winking and blinking mild rays, only just bright enough to gild with pale yellow the tops of the splendid old pines that seem to keep watch over Sir Galahad's domain. The birds are settling down already for the night in their cool leafy coverts, and twittering out a deal of soft nonsense to one another the while. A couple of giant spangled butterflies run a neck-to-neck race over the heads of a group of clove pinks. Dolly and Snap, showing their red tongues, lie close at their master's feet; and my guardian smiles—the smile that lights up his face into the beauty of a god or a star! The trees fling quivering shadows on his cheek, and the errant beams touch his hair with a richer glow. Around him lie masses of leaves that zephyr's wing has scattered here and there, and near him, flashing like topaz in enamel, are the blossoms on the rose trees; but amidst all the loveliness that fills the world, the sky, and the air, my foolish eyes see only *him*!

A woman who deliberates is lost, so out I go, but only to take up a dignified position in a particularly uncomfortable garden-chair, whose iron railings run into my shoulder blades, and from whence my *coup d'œil* of my guardian consists of one ear and the tiniest atom of profile.

For a moment there is silence, only broken in upon by the deep breathing of the two retrievers.

‘Where *are* you, Pearl?’

‘Here!’ I answer, in a low voice.

‘I can *feel* that you are somewhere near me, but I cannot see you!’ he remarks, rather plaintively, and by my bird’s-eye glimpse of his grave face I know that he means what he says.

His words are soothing as oil, and pleasant withal, but nevertheless I sit quite still and silent, as if I were a stone or a statue. He turns round, throws a complaint at me, mute, but eloquent and palpable, and, like a needle to a magnet, I renounce at once dignity and discomfort, and move towards him.

‘Sit here!’ And he catches my hand, and pulls me gently down on the beautiful green grass by him.

I avert my head, and Satan must be close to my idle hand, for I wilfully drag up dozens of lovely spiked blades, and fling them away, just for something to do. I have caught Miss Græme’s habit of never looking some people in the face; that habit I show now.

‘My mother said that you were looking unusually happy this evening, Pearl; are you?’

This is of course a delicate hint that he can see nothing of me but a few long, draggling curls, lying on the nape of my neck, and the back of a lavender muslin dress.

‘I suppose I look happier than I have been doing lately, because I like being back here. Glenthorn is so very much nicer than London,’ I reply tamely; then I add, on second thoughts, ‘At least it is so to *me*.’

‘And to me!’ he says, warmly. ‘Somehow you seemed so far from me in London, Pearl!’

‘Do you not miss your cousin very much, Mr Haviland?’ I ask, dreamily.

‘Well, I don’t know,’ he answers, indifferently. ‘Anyhow, she is a great deal too much occupied just now to miss *me*.’

I ruminate deeply on his words for an instant or so; then my sensitiveness in all matters that concern him and Miss Græme makes me think that there is just a *souçon* of mortification in his tone when he avows that his absence is not felt by her.

‘I really believe you are getting jealous of Mr Talbot or

some one!' I exclaim, angrily, with all the contempt imaginable in the sneer that I give.

'That would not only be foolish of me, but downright wrong, under the present circumstances.'

What on earth can this speech mean? 'Under the present circumstances!' I am all astray, but determined to sift the meaning to the bottom, I forget the shyness that has been hanging over me, and turn fully round, in order to scrutinise his features, with a puzzled expression on my own.

'At last!—I can see your face! But my mother must have been dreaming when she said it looked so happy; why, it is quite a sorrowful little face, Pearl.'

I don't notice his remark; it matters at the moment in nowise to me how I look. Judging by the conflict in my soul, I should fancy my features were of a 'lengthened sweetness long drawn out.' I am dying to find out all about Miss Græme, and forget, in my anxiety and curiosity, to beat about the bush.

'When is Miss Græme coming here?'

'Not just yet—not for a week or so, I think; she is so busy in town.'

'Busy?'

'Yes; it takes some time, you know, choosing a *trousseau*,' he tells me, with a half-smile twitching the corners of his mouth, and averting his head slightly, to hide it from me.

'What did you say?' I cry out in amazement.

'Mimi is going to be married, and she has remained to purchase her wedding-gear.'

'Going to be married! Miss Græme going to be married!' I exclaim, breathlessly. 'To whom?'

'That is a question that you must not ask me, Pearl,' he says, very gravely; and he turns the back of his head quite towards me this time, on the pretence of flinging a stone for Snap to run after, but in reality that I may not scan his features.

I feel that I am grown as white as a sheet, and that I am trembling all over like an aspen leaf. A horrible, a *dreadful* surmise creeps up in my breast—a surmise that I am too craven to embody in words even to myself; but I stoop over the other side and give a cruel pinch to Dolly, who barks and

yells and wags her tail briskly in recognition of my amiable notice of her.

‘And why must I not ask you who Miss Græme’s future husband is?’ I get out quite calmly in a little while, having gulped down my feelings to the best of my power.

‘Because in a moment of weakness I promised to keep the secret. A very foolish promise, for I believe now that it was only extorted from me to keep *you* in the dark—to pique your curiosity. Of course you must know it soon enough.’

‘Is it not a very sudden business?’ I falter, unsteadily.

‘Rather—and yet I always expected and hoped it.’

Enough!—enough! I jump up from my lowly position as if I had been shot, and race down the broad gravel path at my utmost speed, calling both the dogs after me in a light, ringing voice, that has no shake in it, and which cannot in any way betray all I feel.

When, at last, quite breathless from my unwonted exertion, I stand leaning heavily against the gnarled trunk of an old tree that rears itself up at the far end of the lawn, my guardian walks up to me. His gait is slow, with no elasticity in it, and there is a sorrowful expression in his face, and his voice is pained, as he says,—

‘Why did you leave me like that, Pearl? Do you forget that in another ten days you will be gone—that we can almost count the *hours* even of your stay here? Oh, Pearl, you should not grudge me the short time that is left;’ and with this rather lover-like speech, that only elicits an undisguised frown from me, as I take it from an engaged man, he puts my hand on his arm and goes towards the lime-tree avenue, which is his favourite walk.

“ ‘The lime trees’ shade at evening was spreading far and wide ;
Beneath the fragrant arches stroll slowly side by side,
In low and tender converse,
A bridegroom and his bride,” ’

I spout, without even thinking of the matter I am spouting.

‘What lines are those, Pearl?’

‘Oh, only some of Miss Proctor’s that came into my head. They will do nicely when you and Miss Græme walk here by-and-by.’

'Nonsense,' he replies, impatiently, and switching some of the lovely green branches with his stick, he sends them flying through the air with a whir-r. 'Look, Pearl, how I scatter your foolish words to the four winds!' he laughs. 'But now I want to talk to you seriously. Somehow this projected visit of yours to Belgium makes me very uneasy.'

'I shall be all right!' I answer, carelessly.

'I do not know about that. I have no doubt that your aunt will be everything you wish; but the thought of that husband of hers disturbs me greatly.'

'I daresay he is not quite an ogre,' I remark, flippantly.

The truth is that I am dreadfully upset, and uncles and aunts, good, bad, or indifferent, are of small consequence in my eyes in comparison with the incubus that is weighing down my heart.

'He may not be quite an ogre,' my guardian says, in an aggrieved tone, as though my flippancy was unpleasant, 'but you are my charge, Pearl—given to me in trust, and I cannot be too careful of you.'

The tenderness in his voice makes me feel absurdly lachrymose. For a moment I give way.

'Then think of me and pray for me when I am gone,' I respond, in quivering accents, as if I had suddenly grown old; but heartily ashamed of my emotion, I wind up my pathetic little request with a loud, harsh laugh.

He drops my arm, and for the first time I can read down-right reproof in his face.

'Pearl, if there is anything I dislike, it is levity,' he says, sternly.

With monster jealousy and suspicion making me even less of an angel than I naturally am, it is quite impossible for me to soften my mood. I seem to have grown hard all at once, so as to enable me to show a bold front to one who has deceived me. A firm conviction that Sir Galahad is on the eve of marrying Miss Græme, and that after all that has passed he is ashamed to tell me of it, is in my mind; so I cannot shake the black dog off my back, as the children say. In spite of the potency of the spell that his proximity always has over me, I am quite untrue to my nature, and there is bitter acrimony in my tone as I let drop the words.

‘Surely I may be permitted to laugh, Mr Haviland, without being accused of levity? However, as your fastidiousness is offended by my behaviour, it is easy for me to rid you of my presence.’ And off I march, with my head loftily erect, and with the air of a tragic actress.

In a couple of strides of his long legs he completes the distance that it has taken a score of steps on my part to accomplish.

‘Stop, Pearl!’ he exclaims, a little dictatorially, but not for worlds would I halt in obedience to a command, so I only push on faster. ‘Do stop, Pearl!’ he reiterates, but this time the tone of command is changed to one of entreaty.

I pause in my headlong career, principally to take breath, and partly because I have not learnt yet to disobey him even in trivial things; but I am as silent as the grave, and I fear as stubborn as Balaam’s ass.

‘Pearl, it is really ungenerous of you to take advantage of my feelings as you do. Here am I, a middle-aged man, giving in to all the vagaries and caprices of a child like you! What would people think if they saw us racing together like this?’

I am perfectly callous as to what people say or think; and there is no sign of repentance about me as I glance up at him, and see for the first time one or two silver threads gleaming out of the bonnie brown hair that crowns his brow. If his head was as white as the driven snow, I should love him all the same. If he were a cripple, or hump-backed, like Quasimodo, or seamed with small-pox, he would still be *himself*, and that is all I want; but I do not tell him the folly that is in my heart. What I do say to him is this: ‘I never knew you were so very grey! It is certainly time that you married, Mr Haviland.’

‘Perhaps I shall one of these days; and remember, Pearl, that *you* must be at my wedding to participate in my happiness,’ he replies, quietly.

He *is* Miss Græme’s affianced husband, then! Even the day that will make her Mrs Haviland is probably fixed—marked down in his calendar as the white day in his life. My heart beats first as if it were going to burst, and then it feels as if it were going to break. I know that I cannot bear any more, that in another moment the sluice-gates of misery will open, in spite of my efforts to control them.

'I am dreadfully tired—I should like to go indoors,' I chirp, feebly, like a half-fledged sparrow. I really have neither energy nor strength left in me for sparring or 'fencing of any sort. 'Oh!' I think to myself, 'if I could only just burrow my aching head down on the great broad shoulder near me and revel in the luxury of a good cry, it would perhaps pull me right up again from the Slough of Despond into which I am sinking deeper and deeper.' The sound of my weakly voice appeals to his consideration and sympathy at once.

'Are you really very tired, little one? I am a brute for having dragged you up and down here so long just for my gratification!'

It never strikes him then that I am never so happy as when I am near him—that even now, tortured by jealousy, I yet am loth to quit his side. He is thinking—I see it in the far-off expression of his eyes, in the silence that has fallen upon him.

'Do you remember one night, Pearl, some time ago, when you told me in this very walk, under this very tree—for the exact spot is vivid in my memory—that Bertrand de Volnay had all your love and your trust?'

'I remember.'

'Pearl, you will soon see him again, and probably you will learn to love him very much. I ought to hope that you will, but it is very hard for me to do so! Anyway, you will promise not to forget poor old Glenthorn quite? You will give a thought now and then to my mother and to me?'

I dare not speak, for I shall choke if I do!

'When you go away this will be a changed spot to me! I shall never trust myself in the places full of you, where you and I have so often been together. I shall be forced to shut away the past from my mind, and to begin a new life in which *you* will have no share, Pearl!'

And his voice breaks down, while a strong grasp is on my shoulder, and a face, wistful and sad, looks down upon me with earnest eyes, as if in scrutiny. A life in which *I* shall have no share! He means a life passed with Miss Græme! My tears go back to their source, forced back by sheer dint of woefully wounded love and pride. I believe that I hate him as he stands beside me, his eyes gazing right down into my soul. In a little while those eyes will belong to her! I shall never dare

to look into them as I have done. My tone is as firm as a rock, and as hard as flint, when I say,—

‘I am far too sleepy to sentimentalise, so good-night, Mr Haviland.’ And without so much as offering him a hand-clasp I walk away rapidly to the house. Once there, I peep out of a window that gives out on to the lawn. My guardian is still on the same spot where I left him, even in the waning light I can see the shadow that lies heavy on his forehead. He is not happy—and I—O Heaven, give me strength to endure!

CHAPTER XXIII.

ONLY MIMI.

‘To die and part
Is a less evil; but to part and live,
There—there’s the torment!’

O MOST wise Solomon! when he said, ‘Love is strong as death; many waters cannot quench love, neither can the flood drown it!’

But when jealousy diffuses its venom through the heart, love is no more a ‘delightful misery.’ It is unmixed gall, embittering every thought and feeling. Yet there are times when care and pain and annoyance seem to ebb away from me like storm-crested waves, leaving my course across the wide ocean of life calm and clear, and sunlit by hope and peace.

This is when my guardian’s voice falls into its wonted softness, and his eyes flash out the old, old light. One day, when my face was a true index of my mind, and that mind was ruffled by the conviction that Sir Galahad had perchance a more than cousinly liking for Miss Græme, she called over to me, and pointed out to me a passage in Lavater that ran thus,—‘The jealous are possessed of a fine mad devil!’

‘Does a fine mad devil ever possess you, child?’ she asked me, in her aggravating way.

'Yes,' I muttered between my teeth ; and it was the truth that I spoke, for sometimes it seems to me that I could watch her dying, yet not go to her aid ; that I could see her white face grow whiter still, and leave her to suffer, as she loves that others should suffer.

And yet love is not altogether a delirium, though it has many points in common with madness. My love for my guardian is a discovery of the infinite in the finite—of the idea made real. It is an all-powerful, irresistible attraction towards all that I have conceived or hoped for *beyond* myself. When I found within my thoughts the chasm of an insufficient void, there came a longing that his heart should vibrate in unison with my own—that the beams of his eyes should melt and kindle in sympathy with mine—that lips of ice should not reply to lips quivering and burning with my heart's best blood !

And now that the hour of parting is so near, I flit like a small ghost in my white dress from path to path, through the fragrant bosquets, and the blooming wilderness, until I arrive 'unter den Linden.' Here I linger longest to take my farewell, for here my guardian and I have been oftenest together. It is here that his words of reproof have fallen painfully on my ear, and it is here that his lips have whispered words that I can never forget. The reproof is buried in oblivion, but those *other* words will live as long as I do. This is my very last evening at Glenthorn—many and many a league will divide me from it by this time to-morrow.

Through the trailing shadows a white rose-tree gleams up. It is *his* tree, planted by himself years ago. I look round furtively, and, like a thief, steal towards it, and plucking off three or four buds, I press them to my lips, and then, regardless of their young beauty being crushed, I hide them carefully away in the folds of my bodice. Faded and scentless, they will yet remind me of Sir Galahad when I am far away.

When I walk into the drawing-room, with a poor, pale little face, and eyes heavy and red-rimmed like a ferret's, the lamps are all lit, but no one is there to notice my forlorn appearance save Mrs Haviland, who regards me kindly through her spectacles, and to whom my sorrow on the eve of quitting Glenthorn is no displeasing sight.

'Come here, Pearl,' she says ; and, on pretence of blowing

her nose, I see her wipe a mistiness that obscures her glance.

So I push a footstool close to her feet, and seat myself laying my head wearily in her lap. Everything within me feels numb. I have gone through all the hot and cold phases that human nature goes through at times during the last twelve hours. I have hated the idea of going away, and hated the thought of staying on, until the inward conflict has left me perfectly hopeless and prostrate.

For eleven never-ending days I have studiously avoided my guardian, and it is better so—now that he will so soon belong to another. The shadow of Miss Græme's large form lies between him and me.

'Now, Pearl, you must promise to write to us very often, and tell us every little incident about yourself—what you do and where you go,—for you know that we shall be interested in the smallest trifles.'

'Yes—I will write,' I reply, with a sigh. I am quite sure that nothing I can write about will be in the slightest degree interesting to myself. 'And you, dear Mrs Haviland—you will be sure to answer my letters, and keep me *au fait* of everything that happens here? I shall be so anxious to hear what you are all doing, and all about Miss Græme's gay wedding.'

There! it is out with a blurt that I cannot control, and it is the first time that I have alluded to the subject to her.

Mrs Haviland looks surprised for a moment; then she laughs, gently, as is her wont.

'And so Robert has told you after all?'

'Yes.'

'I fancied it was to be kept a profound secret for the present; in fact, I know that Mimi particularly asked him to keep the affair quiet.'

'Why should she wish it to be kept a secret?'

'That is beyond my comprehension. It is an event which I fully expected would come off sooner or later, though I confess, between you and me, that I have been a little puzzled lately. Mimi has cared for her intended throughout, I conclude; but she certainly has had a strange way of showing her preference. You see, Pearl'—and Mrs Haviland takes off her glasses,

wipes them carefully, readjusts them on her nose, and then looks gravely at me,—‘in my day girls were very different from the misses of the period, and in my humble opinion the march of intellect has not improved their manners, even if it has given them more brains. They never used to flirt about with every man that came in their way, and positively flout their flirtations in the very face of the man they were going to marry. But we live and learn ;’ and she leans back reflectively in her chair, and is silent for a moment or two.

I am too miserable to keep the ball of conversation rolling, so I keep her company in her reflections.

‘Anyhow, Mimi will settle down now, I suppose ; and *I shall have ample opportunity of seeing how much matrimony improves her ways and steadies her nature.*’ Confirmation strong as holy writ this. I sink below zero.

‘And is Miss Græme’s *fiancé* very much attached to her ?’ I ask, in a weak little whisper, that comes through the folds of a pocket-handkerchief with which I am trying to smother a sob.

‘Oh yes. He has been in love with her from the first. I know he has always intended marrying her, if she consented—and it is a splendid match for her.’

‘Ah !’ breaks from me, in a short, spasmodic cry.

The pain in my heart is sharp and intolerable, but my two trembling hands fly up and press close my throbbing temples. Mrs Haviland notes my gesture pitifully.

‘You have a headache, or an attack of neuralgia, poor child. I will fetch the salts, or a little chloroform, which will be better ;’ and she rises on her mission of mercy, like the good Samaritan that she is ; but I pull her down again into her seat by the skirts and shade my eyes. Chloroform might benefit me if it sent me into that long sleep from which there is no awaking, but smelling salts will not cure my ailment ; the salt of life has lost its savour—*après cela le déluge.*

What I want is balm poured on my wounded spirit. But there is no balm in Gilbead—no physician here ; so I close my woe-begone eyes, and fall to dreaming. I picture her—Miss Græme—in this room, and the mistress of it ; I picture my guardian clasping his bride in his stalwart arms, and his glance, that I know so well, following her imperial beauty.

All the brightness, all the sunshine of life, seems to fade right away from before me ; nothing, and nobody, seems left, and I grow ' rashly importunate ' to find rest and peace beside papa in that little *cimetière* at La Roche.

' I think she is asleep,' Mrs Haviland says under her breath, passing her hand softly and caressingly over my tangled locks, that bestrew her knee, and dividing them so that they may reveal my flushed face. I have been so dead to everything in the *present*, in my visit to the horrible future, that I have not even heard Sir Galahad's step ; but now, with an effort, I open my eyes, to see him gazing down earnestly and sorrowfully at me. Rising slowly from my lowly seat, I take a chair by the table, and mechanically pass the needle in and out of the canvas. Thus I contrive to ward off all conversation with him, save the conversation in which his mother bears a part ; and when she rises to retire I rise as well, and keep close to her side.

My guardian gives me a candle, and walks up beside me the length of the great oaken staircase, reminding me of the very first evening I spent at Glenthorn. There is a strange, wistful expression on his features when he bids me good-night, and as our hands meet I feel that his are as cold as my own. When he turns away, after lingering a moment or two at my door, he has an unsatisfied look on his face, and his step is weary and slow as he goes towards his own room.

Vividly comes the recollection of my first night here, when, with the petulance of a child, and with crude feelings warring within me, feelings that have ripened day by day, I questioned Sir Galahad about his visitor, and he answered, ' It's only Mimi.'

I go to my window and throw it wide open ; my face burns, and the room stifles me. The August moon, yellow and ripe, shines down in broad streams of golden light. Beneath its beams the leaves of the larches appear silvery and distinct, and the waters of the lake quiver and dance. There is not a sound save the soft sighing of the summer wind, as it woos each flower and leaf, and the wild beating of my own hot heart.

' My last night,' I keep on repeating monotonously to myself. The contrast between the peacefulness outside and

the conflict of my feelings is unbearable. I bang down the window with a thud that startles myself, and burying my eyes in the pillow, to shut out everything, I know that I am perfectly miserable, and that the head and front of it is 'only Mimi!'

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE COUNT.

'The man who bears an honourable mind
Will scorn to treat a woman lawlessly.'
Shakespeare.

I LIVE and breathe, but lack the animation of a human being, as, towards dusk, a shaky, rumbling *fiacre*, drawn by a biped the type of Don Quixote's Rosinante, deposits me and my faithful abigail Susanne beside our two portmanteaus, at the iron-grated door of a small, mean-looking house in the Rue Royale, *extérieure*, Brussels. This is my destination, having been duly warned, in a short missive from my cousin Jack, that my aunt has vacated her country domicile for a little while.

Since I gazed my fill at Glenthorn, as the last view of it disappeared in the distance, my guardian's eyes rest with me, follow me, envelop me as it were. Beyond this one feeling everything is a blank, and I have neither curiosity nor energy to try to penetrate the future.

I stand at the door and ring three distinct times—first a peal that is *dolce*, then a *crescendo*, and a third that is *crescendo con espressione*, before my summons meets with any response; but a species of indifference, which, if I were told to analyse it, I should probably, with the self-deception of human nature, ennoble by the beauteous name of patience, enables me to bear the delay with a serenity which has been hitherto a dormant virtue in my character.

Susanne, poor soul, stands beside me, with her ample arms

laden with a variety of the small packages that are inseparably connected with feminine peregrination. Her portly frame is somewhat weary and aching from the effects of our journey, and I see that she exhibits a gallinaceous tendency—perching first on one leg and then on the other, in the fond but delusive hope of resting each limb respectively.

The face of a woman approaches the grating, cautiously peering through an aperture of some four or five inches. The proceedings and manner of Cerberus are unprepossessing, but she is nevertheless a pleasant apparition in comparison to the prospect I have begun to sketch dimly of a lodging on the cold ground. We enter a hall, narrow in dimension, and obtrusively shabby in appearance. The two portmanteaus are dragged in after us, and by the dim religious light of a slim candle the bolts and chains are carefully replaced, and Cerberus turns towards us a face that is middle-aged, hard of feature, browned and freckled, and yet bearing upon it the remains of good looks. In a harsh voice she bids us *monter*, and we grope up three flights of steep winding stairs that bring us to a small square landing *au troisième*.

Here stands my aunt, the Countess Delaville, with a small lamp in her hand. She towers above the average height of women, her features are good and as finely-chiselled as a statue, and a thick mass of hair, that looks like a mixture of silver and gold, crowns her head. As she advances a step or two, the thing that strikes me most about her is an excessive thinness—a thinness that is next door to, if not quite, attenuation itself. Her skin, perfectly colourless, though very white, is drawn tightly over her face, defining the bridge of the nose and the shape of the cheek bones painfully; and her lips are tightly compressed together, as though their owner was in a chronic condition of mental and physical suffering. She puts out a hand with very long and slender fingers, and takes mine, and says in a voice that is low, deep, almost sepulchral,—

‘I am glad you have arrived, my dear.’

In this first moment of meeting I fall to wondering if she ever *is* glad—the word sounds such a miserable mockery of pleasure on the mouth that presses a kiss so lightly on my forehead that I barely feel the contact. She shows me into the *salon*, and leaves me to give directions for Susanne’s ac-

commodation, for Susanne's presence is evidently an unexpected one.

From the extremely small seat of a cane-backed chair I take an uncomfortable survey of the surroundings of my new home. Two or three dust-begrimed and moth-eaten prints, in which the first Napoleon is the prominent figure, hang in black wooden frames against the dingy walls; a horse-hair sofa, with a pretentious attempt at comfort in the shape of a couple of large battered chintz pillows; an empty oaken buffet, and five companion cane-backed chairs to the one I occupy, form the component parts of an uninviting whole.

Luxury is enervating, I try to impress upon my mind, and I endeavour to be Spartan in my disdain of it; but though the spirit is willing, the flesh is weak. I am tired out, and everything around me is so little conducive to the comfort and rest that frail woman desires, that I have to dig my knuckles right into the sockets of my eyes to keep back a flood of childish tears.

My aunt returns with a small blue bason in her hand.

'Gruel!' I surmise at once; and as spoon diet, even in babyhood, was a pet aversion of mine, I turn away from it with a distaste that adds materially to my corporeal ills.

'I have brought you some hot *bouillon*; it will do you good,' she tells me, again in that low voice, as if she were talking treason, or divulging some state secret.

Bouillon! The word is electricity itself. I am young, and my appetite is healthy, and I take the bason willingly from her hand, and swallow down the savoury contents—and they revive me.

'My son tells me you are called Pearl,' she whispers.

'Yes,' I answer in the same tone.

I feel as if this was no atmosphere for expansion, and that monosyllables are best.

'But that is not your real name, is it?'

'No; my name is Aimée.'

'Aimée! Not a Cathcart name. You are called after your mother, I suppose,' she says; and, recollecting her cruel letter to papa, I fancy I see a cynical curl on her thin lip as she alludes to my christening. This prejudices me at once against her, and I sit a little sulky and silent.

There is a long pause, which I believe it is my duty to break ; but for the life of me no theme presents itself to my mind which can possibly be interesting to the pale, careworn woman, robed in heavy black, with a chaplet of beads round her neck, who sits before me with her hands meekly folded together on her knee, and a resigned look on her features.

‘My cousin told me you generally lived in the country,’ I venture to remark at last.

Town or country, they are alike indifferent to me, but I catch at the first subject that enters my head.

‘I have a small house in the country, but the Count wished me to remain in Brussels while some bachelor friends of his were at the château. But I shall take you there shortly.’

I try hard to look grateful at the prospect, but I fail miserably. However, it does not signify very much, for my physiognomy may indulge in a full play of gratification or discontent, as far as my aunt is concerned. Her sorrowful eyes are fixed on the shining, empty stove opposite, and her thoughts are evidently wandering leagues away from the Rue Royale. I remember, all at once, that Jack said she was very much attached to her husband. Directly this idea presents itself, I regard her with a good deal of increased interest. A human creature whom love has reduced to a mere skeleton, and whose whole being appears absorbed in one overwhelming passion, engages my sympathy at once, and evokes profound respect in my breast, for I am a staunch disciple of Cupid, and am fully cognisant of the influence he exercises over a human heart. The pleasantest theme I can dwell on is my guardian, and, judging by myself, I enter at once on the subject, which I am convinced is the subject, of all others in the world, the most engrossing and palatable to her.

‘Do you expect him here at all?’ I ask.

‘Whom?’ she says, slowly, as if rousing herself out of a reverie.

‘The Count.’

‘Oh, the Count! No, I do not think so; but I am not certain, for his movements are changeable, and he has so many friends that take up his time a good deal,’ she tells me, with a stifled sigh.

I glance at her, and feel sure that jealousy, or some such

fiend-like emotion, ails her, for her features work painfully, and there is a green and yellow light in her eyes, which may be only of my own conjuring up.

Whilst I am trying to dive to the bottom of a mystery, which I have made up my mind exists, she quietly fetches a small bit of lighted candle in a tin candlestick, and gives it to me, and with a twin bit in her own hand she leads the way upstairs.

‘You must be very glad to go to bed, Pearl. It is nearly ten o’clock—quite a late hour for me,’ she says, with the ghost of a smile.

I follow her meekly; but early hours, like innocuous gruel, are my antipathy; and while I mount slowly after her I repeat mechanically, in order to resign myself—

‘Early to bed, and early to rise,’

and all about the sensible early bird and the worm.

We roost *au cinquième*. My aunt, the Countess, inhabits one small attic, and I have the adjoining one; and out of mine is a sort of cupboard, with a settle bed, on which Susanne lies, fast locked in the arms of Morpheus. I throw myself down, and, in spite of sundry hard bumps and swellings in the mattress, weary in mind and body, I fall into a heavy sleep.

The morning light is breaking when I hear my aunt quietly stirring in her room; but the fatigue of the preceding day overpowers me, and emulating the sluggard—

‘Like the door on its hinges, so I on my bed,
Turn my heavy shoulders and my heavy head,’

and drop off into slumber again. The sun is well up, and peering curiously at my dilapidated morsel of carpet when I re-open my eyes, I call softly to Susanne, whose breathing I can hear distinctly through the thin plaster wall. She comes in, looking as blithesome as a bee, and waxes garrulous as she gives me my slippers and fusses over my garments.

‘*Madame la Comtesse est descendue au salon*,’ she informs me pompously, with an unmistakably reverential accent on the title.

It does not seem to strike her in the least that there is a

marvellous incongruity between aristocracy and the abode which it embellishes with its patrician presence ; but I do not care to enlighten her innocent mind on the subject, so I begin brushing my hair violently to avoid replying.

‘Bruxelles est une ville magnifique!’ she next volunteers for my information. I walk up to the window-pane, which is about a foot square, and endeavour to discover by what means she has found out the beauty that she eulogises. I can see nothing but the grotesque forms of some chimneys, and some dirty slate roofs. Down, down, ever so far down, as if we were perched on the summit of a high abyss, I can, with the danger of dislocating my neck, discover some sort of a street.

Shrugging my shoulders, and envying the good Susanne her easily contented disposition, I hasten to complete my toilette, and descend the perpendicular flight of steps to the salon. The breakfast-table is *en fête*, a few light brown pistolets, that the Belgians have adopted for their daily bread, repose side by side in a dish that is flanked by another one that contains a minimum of butter, while some thin slices of galatine from the nearest charcutier’s, garnished by opaque jelly, and some green dots of *cornichons*, form the *pièce de résistance*. My aunt’s housekeeping, I perceive at a glance, is not on a profuse scale, and it harmonises well with the general aspect of her residence in the Rue Royale. I go up and dutifully present my forehead to her, and she imprints on it a chaste salute, in which there is more warmth than I anticipated, and we sit down *tête-à-tête* and *vis-à-vis* to our anchorite repast. When it is finished I look out of the window of the salon, in the hope that it may afford a more expansive view than the one that lights our loft. The street shines clean and wide in the sunbeams, and *bonnes* and cooks, with the snowy headgear shaped like a butterfly’s wings, trudge briskly along with market-baskets on their arms. On the whole, I am favourably impressed, and decide that the exterior of our abode in the Rue Royale is considerably more cheerful than the interior. Something in my face says so, I suppose, for my aunt remarks,—

‘You would like to take a walk, and see the place, Pearl, I daresay?’

And I answer in the affirmative at once.

'Very well, Madelon shall go with you. She knows every inch of the town, and she is capable of taking care of anyone.'

My aunt's fiat is distasteful to the last degree to me, and I turn away my head with an uncontrollable, impatient jerk, which I am thankful she does not see, towards the window. Already, with the dismal prospect of Madelon for a chaperon, the sun has lost a good deal of its brightness.

Madelon, in the dim light of a cheap candle vividly rises up before me, and quite believing in her thorough capability of chaperonage, the visions of an agreeable stroll vanish like the mirage in the desert. I feel that it is best not to revolt at the very beginning, so an hour later we start, and turn down a steep, short street to the right, in which direction we have veered from the first.

'L'Eglise de Ste Gudule,' my duenna informs me unctuously, as we pause before the building. She stands in evident expectation of my eulogies, but though I admire it greatly, I am in too listless a mood to launch out enthusiastically in laudatory expressions, and Madelon turns away pettishly and enters the church, into which I follow her in time to see her throw herself down on her knees in the centre aisle, with the acrimony that is marked on her sharp features not a whit softened by her religious fervour.

Born and bred in a Roman Catholic country, I am still a staunch Protestant, like papa, and when this fact crops out by my not joining in her devotions, Madelon regards me with, if possible, an increased austerity, in which a curious sort of pity is plainly mingled for the miserable little heretic that I am.

We retrace our steps, after her lips have mumbled inaudibly a few *paternosters*, towards the Rue Royale, and then walk rapidly in the direction of the park. The extraordinary speed at which I am forced to go to keep alongside of my companion is consistent with her belief that taking me out is a necessary duty on her part, which she has to get through as quickly as possible; but it is detrimental to my comfort and my breath, and I am thankful when we settle down on a hard bench under the grateful shadow of a spreading lilac, that throws out its scented flowers over my head.

The narrow bit of green that is dotted about with juvenile

trees, appears absurdly mean and circumscribed after the noble English parks. Close to us a pack of noisy children, the veritable *gamins*, that are only a degree better than the London Arabs, shout and gambol, and one or two Belgian officers, in green coats and crimson continuations, reminding me of macaws, pass in review. My thoughts fly back to the place I have left, to Glenthorn, as quickly and as naturally as the swallows fly southwards. If I could but shut my eyes and re-open them on the familiar dells and turfy glades, the shady hollows and the fragrant bosquets where the long grass waves its head in the summer wind, and the wild blossoms blush and peep furtively out of their soft green nests.

'Allons, mademoiselle,' grunts my escort, demolishing my fairy reverie in a trice. She speaks in the south of France *patois*, that I seem to remember still, although I was a very small way beyond babyhood when it fell upon my ear. Who knows but that the reason it is impressed on my memory may be that all the caressing names I ever knew from maternal lips were in it?

Madelon jumps suddenly off her seat, just as if a wasp had stung her, and off we go again at a strapping pace, that sends the blood to my face, and gives me back a blooming specimen of my sex to my aunt at home. Home!—the word mocks me cruelly, though I know that for the present earth holds no other home for me. I notice on entering the sitting-room that my aunt, either from a long residence on the Continent, or else from a due deference to the faith of her second husband, is a renegade from the creed of her family and her youth. An elaborately-carved ivory crucifix lies before her on the table; in her attenuated hands she clasps an illuminated missal, and her thin pale lips move in silent prayer. Religion, for the first time in my life, impresses me as being severe and melancholy. The tears stand in big glittering drops in her large blue eyes, and she tries to wipe them away surreptitiously, and to clear the huskiness of her voice.

'Well, my dear, and what do you think of Brussels?' she says, in the same far-off tone as if she were asking me what I thought of Jamaica.

I have seen so little of it, and under such unfavourable

circumstances, that I am not equal to an unprejudiced opinion, so I reply, listlessly,—

‘It looks very nice.’

‘I believe it is a nice place,’ she goes on in the same monotone; ‘but I never go out myself, for I dislike towns so much.’

And this is the woman whose existence was once thoroughly wrapped up in the world, and the pomps and vanities of the flesh—whose cold, worldly letter was such a cruel blow to papa! What, I wonder, can have created such a metamorphosis? As I sit and watch the weary, wan lines round her mouth, the tired look in her eyes, a violent ring at the bell of the door that shuts our compartment on the third story, a hasty lifting of the latch from inside, and a heavy step, cut short my musings. Another instant, and Maledon flings open the shabby portal of the *salon* in a pompous style, and a man walks in.

Before I take a catalogue of his points, I chance to glance towards my aunt, who has risen from her seat, and stands by the table spell-bound as it were. Her face grows whiter, if possible; her lips quiver at the corners, and her hand palpably grasps the back of her chair for support.

The ‘Count’—for I guess at once that the intruder can only be he, from the free-and-easy manner of his entrance—goes up and takes the tips of his wife’s fingers and bows low over them in a hypocritical and grandiose fashion. Then he turns towards me.

‘Ah! madame’s niece! Permit me, *ma chère enfant*,’ he ejaculates, blandly, in a mixture of very decently pronounced English and the vilest of French accents. And with this he stoops to imprint a paternal kiss on my brow—an embrace which I duck my head down most adroitly to avoid, but as if I eluded it by accident.

I take a rapid stock of him to myself. A huge frame, tall, fleshy, and heavy; a very dark skin, with coarse, prominent features, and coarse jowl and lips. A set of teeth very large, but white as ivory; eyes piercing as a hawk’s, but small and cunning as a fox’s, and redundant whiskers of a dead, deep ebony; a suit of sombre black, with a precise white tie; and he stands before me looking like a sancti-

monious revivalist, or a pharisaical latter-day saint, or a waiter at a *café*, while he rubs his two hands—one of which is clothed in a grey kid glove—softly together—a movement that aggravates me.

Presently he looks round for the most capacious seat in the room ; but as the chairs are all tiny and spindle-legged—or, worse still, three-legged,—he has but Hobson's choice. So he bestrides the dining-table in the middle, from which conspicuous position he takes note, with a supercilious expression, of the place of which he is sole monarch.

A category of his possessions does not seem satisfactory.

'I congratulate you, madame, on your choice of an apartment. *This* is a truly elegant one!' he exclaims, with a burst of undisguised irony.

My aunt hesitates; then, in a feeble voice, which has, to my fancy, a ring of *fear* in it, she replies,—

'I could not help it—I had so little—'

He cuts her sentence short by a sharp, admonitory glance, and says benignly,—

'Yes, yes—I know—you had so little choice; the town is full, and rooms are difficult to procure. And you, *chère mademoiselle*—how do you like Brussels?'

'I don't know,' I reply, more brusquely than duty towards my elders and superiors warrants; and I have a strong desire to tell him that, of all I have seen here, he is what I dislike most.

'Ah!' This is an interjection he is apparently very partial to. 'You will like it, no doubt, when you come to know us better,' he confidently assures me.

Heaven forbid! I murmur inwardly. It is an intimacy that holds out no pleasurable anticipation, for this man's appearance singularly rouses up every antagonistic feeling in my nature, as he regards me with a continuous stare out of his hard eyes, unmindful of my ill-concealed annoyance.

'Do you intend to sleep here to-night?' my aunt asks, humbly.

'Here?' and he flings another contemptuous look on the threadbare morsel of carpet that adorns the centre of the room, and on the rickety furniture. 'Now, madame, can you really expect me to do so?'

And he laughs a coarse, loud, withering laugh, under the baleful influence of which his better half shrinks visibly into herself.

'No! no!—of course you cannot,' she avows, deprecatingly, with an upward, timid glance at him, as though craving her lord and master's forgiveness for her temerity in supposing such a thing possible.

Conversation lags a moment or so, then she questions him.

'How long shall you remain in Brussels?'

As long as I am able to amuse myself,' he replies, carelessly, with a side-long look at me.

My aunt reddens up.

'It is a new idea—your stopping. Only two days ago you wrote me that you had friends visiting you at the château, and could not leave them.

'*Diable!* Madame, how you beat round the bush about trifles! Have you not learnt yet that I allow neither friends nor anything else to interfere with my will?' he exclaims, with the air of a Turk.

'Horrible autocrat!' I ejaculate, fervently. I can see at once that he rules my aunt with a rod of iron.

'Yes, yes—I know,' she says again, nervously.

'It is my turn to question now. How long does Mademoiselle remain with you?'

She glances uneasily at him, and then at me. She wishes me to stay with her, and yet she does not. My aunt is like myself—a victim to the green-eyed monster; sympathy reveals this to me.

'Are you obliged to go back to England soon, Pearl?' she asks me, in an anxious voice.

Sir Galahad—Miss Græme—the approaching marriage at Glenthorn—all pass through my brain.

'I do not wish to return there at present,' I speak out boldly. Anything is better, even life under the same roof as the Count, than going to Glenthorn now.

'*C'est bien!*' breaks from the monster, with a grunt of apparent satisfaction; but on my aunt's face there is the shadow of a frown. I have had quite enough of conjugal converse. All my feathers seem ruffled up the wrong way,

and I have a sore feeling all over me, as though I had been ignominiously dragged backwards through a furze bush.

I walk out of the den of discord, and mount to my attic, where, in spite of bare boards and poverty-stricken surroundings, my taste will not be so much in revolt. At four o'clock Susanne announces that dinner is ready, and, loth as I am to encounter the bold black eyes below, I am forced to descend.

The viands are not badly cooked or served, and Madelon, furbished up with a smart pink ribbon in her cap, and a smile on her countenance, waits with a zeal and alacrity on the Count that surprises me, as I contrast her amiability to him with the sour scowls she awards her mistress, and of which my aunt takes no notice.

My initiation into life at Brussels has not added a zest to my appetite, but I notice that were I inclined to indulge in the gastronomical efforts of Madelon, I should be disappointed, since monsieur with a fell swoop clears each consecutive dish, and his wife comes second best off.

The Count is evidently of the earth, earthy, and I arrive at the conclusion, by the time that the meal is over, that by catering plentifully and artistically to his fondness for food, Madelon has succeeded in exciting a sentiment of gratitude in his broad breast, for he shows her a marked consideration in his manner, and softens for her the rough edges of his voice, even when it is employed in asking for another cutlet.

The dinner is finished, and we three—the Count, my aunt, and myself, an uncongenial trio—are left to pass the evening somehow. It is a flat prospect, truly, but an inevitable one; yet it is preferable to the alternative I am offered.

‘Would you like to go to the theatre, *mon enfant*?’ the Count says, in an insidious voice.

I catch a quick look from my aunt over an old book of devotions—a look with a sort of wistful pleading in it, that would decide me to a negative at once, even if my own inclinations did not tend that way.

‘No, thank you,’ I answer, with all the politeness I can muster up, but he has infinite faith in his persuasive powers, for he goes on,—

‘Do come. It will be far more agreeable for you than sitting and stifling all the long evening in this *chambre affreuse*!’

He speaks in a low voice, that cannot well reach his wife's ear; a pair of eyes that I hate flash coarsely into mine, and all his white teeth seem to glisten and glitter so close to me that I feel inclined to call out, like little Red Riding Hood, 'What big teeth you have!' but am prevented doing so by a morbid fear of hearing him reply, 'The better to eat you with, my dear!' I am too much in awe of him to refuse his invitation save by a shake of my head.

'You do not care to go with *me*,' he says, wrathfully, and turning away, he lights a large pipe which emerges from his pocket, and sends up great volumes of smoke, which fill the small, close room with an odour that nauseates me. So, without more ado, I seize my candle, and with a quiet '*Bon soir*' to this ill-assorted couple, I wend my way to bed.

'You *must* have some in the house!' the Count mutters in the neighbouring attic, and rouses me from my 'beauty sleep,' in which I have dreamt dreams impossible but blissful. His is not a voice for a lullaby, and I wake up thoroughly. I feel all in a tremble, just as if I were going to be initiated into the horrible mysteries of Blue Beard's chamber.

'Indeed! *indeed*! Jean, I have only a very few francs,' responds my aunt, with a shaking voice.

'And if you had, *vieille femme*, you would not hand it over to me, but guard it carefully for yourself,' comes in a barely suppressed growl.

'Oh no, I would not, Jean! You know I never refuse you anything; for I love you, Jean, love you with all my heart!'

'*Fi donc*! Love! What a word from such old withered lips! You *love* me, *sacrebleu*! do you? And what do I care whether you do or not? Keep your love to yourself, and give me what I want—*money*—or by heavens—' Here is a pause, whilst I listen intently, dismayed, and I can count the throbs of my heart—they are so audible. 'I'll *make* you!' he hisses out like a serpent, and I feel perfectly sure that he has gripped hold of her while he threatens, for she croons out, in a pathetic lament,—

'Don't, Jean. You hurt me!—hurt me, body and soul! Oh! Jean, what have I done that you should have ceased to care for me so very, very soon?'

My tears drop fast, although I have no real sympathy with her in her infatuation ; nay, I have a contempt for her, that she, a lady, well born and refined, should set her affection so low.

‘Why have I *ceased* to care for you ? A feeling that has not existed cannot cease. Now you cannot surely be such a fool as to believe that I ever had affection for you ! What are you but a mummy, an animated corpse, with your white parchment skin, and your lack-lustre eyes ; and yet you have the effrontery to expect love ! Madame, at your time of life all you should think of is your grave.’

A sort of low chuckle breaks in here, a chuckle in which distinctly recognise Madelon’s tones. She must have been listening at the door of my aunt’s room, for I hear the sound of her nailed boots running down the stairs. Every fibre of my frame is up in arms. I involuntarily double up my puny fists, but they fall impotently on the coverlet, while I sit shivering with dread and rage united, and feel myself perfectly helpless to remedy so crying an injustice, so horrible an existence as my poor relative has brought upon herself.

‘Don’t be cruel !’ she says, beseechingly. ‘And if you cannot love me, do not tell me so, for it cuts me to the very heart, Jean, it does indeed ! Of course I know you must want money, but I cannot get any, at least not just yet.’

‘You can get it fast enough,’ he answers, doggedly. ‘Write to your son !’

‘Oh ! I cannot, indeed, Jean ! I have asked him so often lately, and I do not want Jack to know that it was only for money that you married me !’ the poor thing moans out piteously, in the hope, perhaps, that her tyrant will try to comfort her by the assurance that he *does* care for her to some extent. She has lived considerably over half a century, and yet Cupid has her fast in his chains. She loves, actually loves this giant bully, this miserable knave and coward, who lives on her funds, and reviles her for the tenderness that she bears him. The two are silent for a minute or two ; then he resumes, in a voice that has suddenly changed from a tone of command to one of wheedling and entreaty,—

‘Will you show me your son’s last letter ?’

‘Yes,’ she answers with alacrity, but some thought strikes her, and she hesitates. ‘Why do you want to see it ? You

surely do not require the address for the purpose of writing to him?' she asks, nervously.

'No fear! I have no particular wish to correspond with my handsome *beau fils*. We are not in the least *sympathique*,' he cries, disdainfully; and I am glad, for Jack's honour and credit, that it is so. 'I merely want to see on what date he sent the last paltry sum, and if you gave me *all*?'

'Of course I did, Jean,' she replies, hurt at his suspicions.

'Well, then, you cannot mind showing me the letter,' he returns to the charge, and I suppose my aunt knows that it is futile denying him, for I hear her rise and move across the room. 'I *want* this,' he says, determinedly, and the paper rustles as he stuffs it into his pocket.

'I would rather keep it,' she murmurs low.

'I daresay you would, but you won't. And now, as you are not in a generous mood, I think I will go.' He gives a heavy stride towards the door, and there he pauses, for his voice comes louder as he adds,—'She is not a bad-looking girl, your niece, madame, but she has the devil's own temper, which I must try to tame. I believe you have been abusing me to her, for she looks as if she hated me!'

'Don't let her see that you admire her, Jean.' And the foolish woman's prayer seems to go up from her soul.

'Jealous again!' he sneers. 'You grudge me the very sight of a young and pretty face! Rather hard, considering what a faded, wretched old creature I am linked to!'

After this the door closes with a careless bang, one or two suppressed but bitter sobs fall on my ear, and then all is silent.

'Oh! if Jack were here!' I cry, and I begin to devise all manner of projects by which I can expose to him the shameful treatment his mother undergoes at the hands of this ruffian Count. Then the thought suddenly rushes into my mind, carrying conviction with it, that this man is capable of anything, and I fear for Jack, and for my aunt, as well as for myself.

At last, having double-locked my door, I fall asleep, and I dream that I am at the Zoological Gardens—the gorilla's cage is near me, and as I go up close to examine his huge white teeth, he suddenly turns into the Count Delaville.

CHAPTER XXV

DIAMONDS ARE OF THE DEVIL'S KINGDOM.

‘Avarice reigns most in those who have but few qualities to recommend them. It is a weed that will grow in a barren soil.’

OUR early and frugal breakfast is over, and I suggest to my aunt, that as this is Sunday, I should like to go to church. She assents to my proposition at once, but tells me that the ‘Quartier Léopold,’ where the Protestant church is located, is at a considerable distance from this, and that she does not approve of the peregrinations of unprotected damsels. Therefore, to satisfy her scruples, Susanne accompanies me to the door, and fetches me home when the service is concluded. The plain building, ungarnished by all the paraphernalia of the Romish faith, the familiar and beautiful words of the psalms, the simple and earnest sermon, remind me of the little village church at Glenthorn, where I have so often knelt and prayed side by side with my guardian.

The Rue Royale seems so dreary and desolate as I enter, that a few natural tears rush to my eyes, and to hide them from my aunt I quietly sit down in a remote corner of the *salon*, and give myself up to the painful luxury of sorrowful reflections.

‘Pearl, do you persuade yourself that you are following the true faith?—does it never enter your mind that the Protestant religion is very tame and colourless?’ my aunt says to me, in a gentle, remonstrative accent, after we have both been silent, each one completely engrossed in self, for at least an hour.

I am in the act of munching a hard biscuit, and I pause before I answer—first, because it is not good breeding to speak with one’s mouth full, and secondly, because, not believing myself particularly strong in theological discussions, I am half afraid to venture on the subject. Religion to me is a blessing, a good in which I have infinite faith, but which I never try to bring down to the level of my own puny understanding. I adore with the ardour of an impassioned nature

the 'Great Spirit,' and I trace His power in every lovely form of nature. Each beam of light, each glistening leaf, each blushing blossom, seems to me like living things, speaking of Him whose home is in the vaulted sky ; and I can pray to Him within four bare walls, or under the clear blue heavens, without the pomp of ceremony to aid my devotions or to elevate my thoughts. A feeling, indigenous in my breast, prompts me to take up the cudgels in defence of the creed which papa taught me, and I answer, a little warmly,—

'I do not think my faith tame and colourless ; but Roman Catholicism is too florid—a great deal too florid to my notions.'

My aunt looks mortified, and dreadfully sorry for me as well, as if she were convinced that my downward course after death was a sealed fact. I know that at this moment I hold the unenviable position, in her estimation, of a poor little ignoramus, narrow-minded and prejudiced, an obstinate lost sheep that *will* stray from the fold.

As a rule, I am not argumentative—women with nervous, impulsive temperaments like mine seldom are. It is the large stolid type that love discussion in a quiet, provoking way, and that never seem to lose their tempers over it ; but now something propels me to ask,—

'Aunt, do you never feel any regret or remorse for having deserted the religion in which you were brought up ?'

She flushes over face and neck with excitement.

'Regret and remorse ! Oh, Pearl, do you think I am not truly grateful with all my heart to the Heaven that has led me into the straight and narrow path ? What should I do in all the many anxieties and cares that flesh is heir to, without this blessed symbol for my stay and comfort !' And she takes out reverentially a little silver crucifix, hanging to a broad black ribbon, which has been hidden in the folds of her bodice, and falls to kissing it fervently.

'Is it long since you became a per—' I recollect myself, and stop short awkwardly, with a hot blush at my terrible mistake ; but she is engrossed in her own sentiments, and only takes in the sense of my words.

'Since I have been a convert—not more than some months,' she answers, without thinking ; and then her cheeks

reflect more deeply still the blush on mine, for she guesses at once that I have been trying to discover what *caused* the change in her faith—whether it came about from pure religious conviction, or whether it was based on some earth-born reason.

‘Was it when you married?’ I say to the point.

‘Yes,’ and she hesitates a moment. ‘The Count certainly seemed to wish it; but of course, in spite of his desire on the subject, I should have remained staunch to my former tenets if God had not, in His sublime mercy and pity, opened my eyes to the truth.’

I feel that she is deluding herself lamentably, but I dare not give expression to my thought. Her utter self-abandonment to the love she bears her scamp of a husband is evidently the Alpha and Omega of everything she does and believes.

‘Assuredly there can be no *real* marriage between man and wife unless their religious faith be the same,’ she goes on, with her whole soul in her theme; ‘and therefore, when I married a Roman Catholic, I gave my mind entirely up to the study of a subject that, under other circumstances, might not have presented itself so vividly before me. Thanks be to an all-wise Providence’—here she glances up and crosses herself devoutly—‘that I was placed in a position that *made* me come out of the darkness into eternal life!’

I cannot help surveying her with compassion. It has never been my lot, I am glad to say, to be cast with intolerant folk; but it grieves me sorely to see her so delude herself as to her motive, even though the result she has arrived at be a most desirable one.

‘You cannot think, Pearl, how deeply the Count regrets that you are not of our Church. But you are still very young—your opinions are crude, unsound, and perhaps we may yet reach the happiness of knowing that our faith has become yours,’ she tells me, warming up wonderfully with her topic, and oblivious, in her animation, that her voice has gone up many octaves higher than it ordinarily does.

At this moment the door gently opens, and the Count, with a doubly sanctimonious expression on his face, walks in, and takes a chair by my side, on the edge of which he perches as if on tenter-hooks, and continues his habitual soft rubbing

of his two hands. He has evidently been guilty of the meanness of listening, for he says, in a low, professional whine,—

‘That is right, madame ; do your best to convert her, and I will lend my poor efforts to bring this little erring lamb within the right fold.’

I look at him with contempt, and I hate him, this wolf in disguise. I cannot help flashing out my aversion, but my glance falls unnoticed, for the Count, his religious ardour abated, and unmistakable cupidity shining on his countenance, examines intently the locket and diamond bracelet that were my *cadeaux* on my birthday from Sir Galahad and his mother, and which, by way of compliment to my aunt’s Sunday dinner, I have donned to improve the aspect of my quiet grey silk.

‘These *are* fine stones !’ he exclaims, lifting up my wrist for a closer inspection—‘remarkably fine !—and of great value, I should think. Their colour is superb !’ And his eyes seem literally to gloat on the gems as they glitter and flash in the light.

He next studies my locket.

‘May I have it a moment ?’

I dare not refuse so simple a request, but I feel that his bare touch is dire desecration.

He takes it in his gigantic palm and begins weighing it in a most business-like manner, reminding me of the usurers in the Temple.

‘Massive,’ he says, impressively, with the undisguised guttural satisfaction of a Jew, eyeing the trinket with both respect and admiration.

‘English jewellery is certainly the best of all. It is so good and so substantial—none of your effective flimsy trash about it ; but the *real* article, worth the price, and which you can turn into money. And what have we inside ? Of course it is *l’amant* of mademoiselle—the “sweetheart,” as the English say.’

And before I can seize hold of the trinket to prevent him from looking with his dreadful eyes on papa’s face, he has touched the spring and the case is wide open.

Can it be that papa’s eyes—eyes as blue as violets, as holy as the sky above us, possess, even in a mute and lifeless form,

power to touch this bad man's heart, and to make him quail before the purity and nobility of a face on which the history of an unstained life is legibly written?

The Count starts visibly. His face turns quite pale, and he shuts the clasp violently, so as to get the likeness out of his sight.

'Whose face is it?' he asks me, in a thick, almost inaudible voice.

'Papa's,' I answer, proudly.

'Does he live?'

For all answer I burst into a passion of tears. The Count lays a burning hand upon mine, but I shake it off, as if it were a black venomous reptile, and shudder. He marks the gesture and shrugs his shoulders; then he rises and takes his hat.

'I shall not dine here,' he says, curtly, to my aunt.

'Madelon will be very much vexed,' she replies, in surprise at his sudden change of plan. 'She has been busy all the afternoon preparing some *côtelettes provençales*—a dish you were fond of in your early days, she tells me.'

'Tell her I cannot help myself—that I am obliged to go out. This room is so stifling it makes me ill!'

And he looks ill—with a bluish grey on his dark sallow skin, and a lurid light in his bold eyes that makes his appearance seem ghastly. My aunt's solicitude awakes at once, and quite unmindful of my presence, she goes up to him and passes her thin fingers fondly and caressingly over his arm, while she looks in his face, all alarm and affection.

'It is only the heat, Jean? I hope you are not ill?' she questions anxiously of the big burly man, who appears as if he were cast in iron or in granite. In spite of the tears that are blinding me, I cannot resist glancing up at him to mark how he responds, and whether, by any chance, there is a leaven of goodness lurking beneath so unpleasant a mass of flesh. A scowl, black and beetling, draws his two thick eyebrows together in a hideous curve; his coarse lips curl, and dislike, downright, unmitigated dislike, evinces itself on every one of his features.

'*Vieille folle!*' he snarls through his closed teeth, as he roughly pushes her hand away. '*Parole d'honneur*, you try

me! One cannot eat, drink, sleep, or even be ill, without your worrying! Leave me alone!’

He suddenly recollects that he and his miserable wife are not the only two in the room, and he flushes a vivid scarlet as he encounters my indignant gaze. In a trice he changes his tactics and leans lovingly towards her.

‘Pardon me, madame; illness made me impatient for a moment. Let me make the *amende honorable*.’ And taking the poor fingers he has a moment before rudely repulsed, he presses them lightly to his lips.

As he kisses them my aunt’s whole countenance lights up with a sudden beam that alters her appearance completely. I stare at her in amazement. The magic touch of those coarse lips calls up two crimson, glowing spots in either cheek; her pale blue eyes flash out fire, her mouth loses all its rigid lines, and waxes soft and flexile. But it is all momentary, and as soon as the Count’s broad back disappears through the doorway, ‘Richard is himself again,’ cold and white and silent.

An hour afterwards, when the knowledge that for to-day at least we are likely to be left to our own devices, free from an obnoxious presence, proves a panacea for my spirit, my aunt and I sit down to a comfortable chat. She is undoubtedly kind to me in her own way, and this, united to the fact that I have so few of my own flesh and blood in existence, makes me cling to her with an affection which I feel sure she returns, although she is not of a demonstrative or gushing nature.

Our chatter, unlike women’s chatter in general, does not savour of the fashions. Even as a little child my tiny nostrils were wont to curl contemptuously at the dainty, furbelowed images of human beings on the pages of *Le Follet*. As I grew up, the lilies of the field were my example, and I would neither toil nor spin, and this pitiable ignorance on my part, united to the short length of papa’s purse, engendered a habit in me of disliking ‘dress.’ I think I ought to have been born a child of the desert, for my spirit chafes so at the fopperies and conventionalities that are exacted by society. I have been brought up like a weed—uncultivated but sturdy,—and if a hand had tried to train me in the orthodox paths of fashion, it would have killed me outright. And yet I am

inconsistent too, for, with all my distaste and disdain of dress and glitter, the flavour of Cathcart pride impregnates my character, and used to make me look with the most servile respect and admiration on some old pictures that papa had of his high-born ancestors, that, braced up in buckram, and furbished to the most elevated point of *la mode*, sat uncomfortably, as if on pins and needles, to support their position and dignity.

But to return to my aunt. Dress, in her estimation, is only a pitfall for the unwary steps of the innocent, and she affects plain and neutral-tinted garments, without so much as a line of colour running through them. But we do not quite escape touching on the pomps and vanities of this wicked world; for jewels we discuss, and in this wise. We have been silent for some time, while she is evidently pondering deeply on some subject, for her forehead is all in little puckers, a peculiarity of deep thought that I have noticed in several people. At last, as it naturally happens, words, indicative of her vein of thought, fall from her mouth.

‘Those are certainly very handsome ornaments of yours, Pearl! I should like to look at them through my glasses.’

I put the locket and the bracelet into her hand and fetch her spectacles, and she examines the locket both outside and in for a long time, while I love her dearly for the wet lashes that droop low over her pale cheek as she gazes at papa’s picture.

‘How handsome he was, with his deep blue eyes and beautiful fair hair—a true Cathcart!’ she murmurs very softly. ‘Pearl, if you would not think it very childish of an old woman like me, I should so like to kiss this; it seems such a long, long time ago since Philip and I kissed one another!’ and she sighs a genuine deep sigh that goes to my heart. I seize the locket quickly and press it to her lips, and then by way of relieving my overcharged feelings, I fling my arms round her neck and bestow on her a hearty hug. She looks surprised but pleased at the ebullition I have allowed myself—and she smiles, her faint, spectre-like semblance of a smile, up at me.

‘Did poor Philip give you this?’

‘No; it was Mrs Haviland’s gift.’

I thought it could not be your father's gift. Philip was improvident in his youth, and I do not suppose that riches increased much as he grew older !'

'Oh, no !' I answer, sorrowfully, and memory flies back to the days when papa and I were very, very poor, almost in want of our daily bread ; when he used to bring home in his pocket a small packet of cake or a savoury pie from some cheap Viennese restaurant for the mite at home ; and later on, when he and I, he in a well-worn coat, shiny at the seams and brown at the collar, and I in a faded short frock and a shabby hat, would dine *al fresco* at fifty centimes a-head, in some French suburban café. And even at La Roche, when we used to 'play at economy,' as we called it, each in the hope of deluding the other ; but it *was* economy, painful, rigid, and very uncomfortable economy all the while, and cost him many an anxious moment.

My aunt recalls me to the present.

'I have a few things in the way of jewels too, Pearl ; heir-looms of the Cathcarts, which ought to have gone to your mother, if my father had not disinherited poor Philip. I am keeping them to give to Jack's wife, when he has one.'

This last brings Miss Græme before me. I see her again in her violet trailing skirt and gold-tinted hair, dazing Jack's brain by her glorious beauty. But Miss Græme is a whited sepulchre, fair without and foul within ; and Jack had a lucky escape when she threw him over for—whom ?

I shut my eyes tight—tight, so as to try to bar *that* thought out of my mind.

'I should like to show the trinkets to you ;' and my aunt glides away with a noiseless step.

In a few moments she returns, carrying a small square box made of common deal. I observe the unpacking arrangements with surprise, as, from under sundry scraps and shreds of old newspaper and dirty shavings, she extracts at last a faded maroon velvet case. Raising the lid she displays a whole *parure* of exquisite workmanship ; large brilliants sparkle from their satin bed, and liquid sapphires repose alongside of them. In one corner of the case a dozen rings of costly stones, tied together by a piece of bobbin, lie in a glittering heap. If Miss Græme could only see the booty she

has lost, she would, in a measure, repent of her rejection of Jack, I think. Then I remember the famed splendour of the Haviland diamonds, and it comes to me vividly that the wicked flourish like the bay-tree.

'These are really lovely !' I exclaim, as I see the brilliants and the sapphires flashing glances at one another, and exciting my girlish fancy for gew-gaws that dazzle my vision. 'Have you ever worn them, aunt ?' and then I am sorry I have asked the question, for it seems such a mockery.

'Never since my second marriage. In fact, I do not think the Count has ever seen them, unless it was for a moment on the day before our wedding, when they were being packed by my maid. I had a lady's-maid then—an English one ; but the Count dismissed her, as Madelon was capable of doing all the work. I fancy he does not even remember that I have these in my possession,' she says, in the low whisper which struck me so much on the evening of my arrival ; and she replaces the jewels carefully in the case, and covers the case itself over with the infinitesimal bits of paper and shavings ; and as she does so, an idea strikes her, for she pauses before she drops the velvet case into the wooden box.

'Pearl, are you very fond of wearing such things ?'

'Not particularly,' I answer, in all sincerity, for I really have not the weakness for jewellery that most of my sex seem to possess.

'You are sure that being deprived of wearing them would not give you pain ?'

'Quite sure,' I reply promptly. I do not like her to think that my soul is not above such trivialities as ornaments.

'Then will you do me a great favour, dear child ?'

'Certainly.'

'Give me the locket and the bracelet to keep for you along with these. It is dangerous to let them lie about, and in this old box no one will ever suspect that valuables are hidden. *Do not* refuse me, Pearl.'

I look for a minute yearningly at the objects in question. They remind me of Glenthorn. It *is* hard to put them voluntarily out of my sight, but after all it is the pictures inside that are all the world to me, so I quietly take them out and hand the trinkets to my aunt, fully repaid for the sacrifice

of feeling that I have made by the look of satisfaction that steals over her countenance as she hides the whole lot away ; but she evidently fancies that it is necessary for her to make some excuse for the extraordinary amount of caution requisite in the house, and so she says, deprecatingly, and in rather a confused fashion, just as she prepares to go upstairs,—

‘ You see, Pearl, that we shall be going into the country soon, and it would make me very nervous to know that your valuables were a temptation to anyone who might be about the château.’ And when she reaches the door, she hurls back a little aphorism at me by way of consolation for my sacrifice. ‘ Do not let yourself regret the absence of the ornaments, Pearl. We should never forget, in this transitory life, that dress is only pomp and vanity, and that diamonds are of the devil’s kingdom.’

CHAPTER XXVI.

A WOLF IN SHEEP’S CLOTHING.

‘ How many cowards whose hearts are all as false
As stairs of sand, wear yet upon their chins
The beards of Hercules and frowning Mars,
Who, inward searched, have livers white as milk ! ’

‘ MIMI has come home and confusion reigns through the house. I shall be thankful when the wedding is over.’

This is the sentence in Mrs Haviland’s last letter that I read mechanically over and over again, whilst the words sear into my brain like words of fire. It has come, then, the time when even to think of my guardian as I have done will be a crime—against his wife, against heaven. I grow a little indignant at being kept in the dark to the very end ; and with an angry hand I tear up the letter into fragments, and wipe my eyes hastily ; but the Count catches me. He seems to prowl about the house, dropping in at odd moments when he is least expected.

‘ What ! crying, mademoiselle ! Has Madame la Tante been worrying you ? ’ he asks, stooping to peer under my

lowered lids, and approaching so close that his long oleaginous whiskers sweep my cheek.

‘My aunt *never* worries me,’ I answer, loftily, moving away my head as far as possible from his.

‘Really! Well, you are certainly more fortunate than I am,’ he laughs, shrugging his ponderous shoulders, a habit to which he is addicted, like all his countrymen. ‘*Ma foi!* I find her a regular scold—with a tongue *a la sauce tartare*.’

‘Perhaps you deserve it,’ I observe, more bluntly than civilly.

‘You are very free spoken, *petite!* May I ask if all the young English misses are so frank? Truth is not to be told at all times, you know—and you forget who I am,’ he remarks, pompously.

‘You are my aunt’s husband,’—and I mutter, half audibly—‘worse luck.’

‘Yes, I am your aunt’s husband, and *par consequence* your uncle, mademoiselle,’ he informs me, with a sardonic grin.

‘You are not my *real* uncle; I have only one, and *even you* might object to be he,’ I say, heedlessly.

‘Who is he?—an Englishman?’

‘No—a Frenchman.’

I seem to have a strange desire to vent my feelings about the individual in question, so I add, rashly,—

‘He is one Jacques La Porte. Did you ever happen to meet him? He is, like you, from the south of France.’

The Count, while I speak, is occupying himself by a study of my features with his keen hawk’s glance. The survey is evidently pleasing and satisfactory, for he beams effulgently upon me.

‘I am so glad you are beginning to talk to me at last, *mon enfant!*—I was afraid you and I were going to be strangers to the end of the chapter, and such a state of affairs between near relatives is a pity. No, I do not think I ever met Monsieur Jacques La Porte in my travels in the south.’

‘Your travels! Are you not a Marseillais?’ I ask him quickly.

‘A Marseillais! What could put such an idea into your head? I am Parisian—*vrai Parisien*—at your service,’ he says, with a familiar look.

I relapse into silence, angry with myself for talking to a man that I despise and distrust.

‘What is your respected relative?’ he asks presently.

My *respected* relative! It is adding insult to injury to hear such words!

‘A ruffian!’ I blurt out on the spur of the moment.

‘Ah! you see I am not likely to run across such people.’

‘There are a good many foreigners like him,’ I say, with a meaning glance.

‘*Merci!*’ he ejaculates with unction; and if the cap fits him I am sure he is welcome to wear it.

He takes a chair and plants it in close proximity to mine, and his countenance dons its blandest—an expression that conveys to me the perfection of hypocrisy.

‘Let us have a little conversation together; it is not often madame grants us a *tête-à-tête*.’

And this is quite true, for my aunt certainly keeps a vigilant watch always. Even when she falls asleep in the *salon* after dinner she appears to have one lid partially open, for at the smallest movement of her spouse she is up straight and stiff in her chair. She has gone to vespers, and thus it is that the Count and I hold the room conjointly.

‘Since I have been here I have remarked with real chagrin that I am not *sympathique* to you, mademoiselle. Yet why not? We are both well-born and well-bred, our tastes and feelings must be very much alike, yet we fail in one great requisite—we don’t find affinity. You shun me, and you do not even try to dissemble your dislike. Let me ask you once again—why is it so?’

He has divined my sentiments, but I am afraid of him; so I temporise and answer formally,—

‘Monsieur gives himself too much trouble about my likes and dislikes. They are not worth his attention!’

‘Mademoiselle, you never were more wrong in your life than when you say that. Nothing about you can be unworthy of trouble! You are young, and you are as fresh and blooming as a rose of the south; and you must have many admirers, but none greater than I!’ And his two rows of large teeth display themselves for my benefit in an insidious smile, while he drags his chair still nearer to me and seizes hold of my hand. ‘You have never given me a kiss!’ he says, persuasively. I open my eyes wide in amazement at his effrontery.

‘Why not? This is now your home, and I am *in loco parentis*,’ he tells me, and then he swoops down on me, and I realise the horror of a hurried caress, that catches the tip of my nose.

In the twinkling of an eye he is back in a seat, and at a respectful distance, with his features elongated into seriousness, as my aunt walks in, black-robed and severe, and with a suspicious expression, as she surveys us. I feel my ears and my nose all tingling with indignation at the uncalled-for insult I have been subjected to, and she marks the unwonted brilliancy of my colouring, and draws her conclusions accordingly.

‘I thought you told me you were unable to come here to-day,’ she remarks to him in a caustic, huffy tone, with a petulance in her manner which I have never seen before.

‘I could not resist,’ he answers, demurely, casting a covert glance towards me, and I feel sure that his left eye screws itself up in a slight wink. Disgusted at such bare-faced familiarity, I turn my back completely towards him, and take up a book.

‘What an extraordinary answer, Jean!’ my aunt murmurs *sotto voce*. ‘What was it you could not resist? One of Madelon’s dishes?’

‘Yes, madame, a *chef-d’œuvre au naturel*,’ he replies, with a loud chuckle at his own wit. My aunt glances angrily first at him and then at me, and my wrath rises with a sense of injustice.

‘I disturbed you in a pleasant *tête-à-tête*,’ she says, with irrepressible jealousy infusing a rare tartness to her voice.

‘It does not signify in the least. My niece and I can have plenty more,’ her *vaurien* of a husband remarks flippantly, laying a stress on the word niece, and then he rises to go.

‘You did not come for supper, then?’ she exclaims.

‘Mademoiselle’s society is both meat and drink. I could not resign myself to common-place fare after it,’ he says, gravely, with a low bow to me; and not a whit abashed by the presence of his wife, he comes forward, and presses a loud-sounding salute on my fingers.

‘*A demain, madame*,’ he murmurs, with a melodramatic wave of his grey-kidded hand, and he vanishes like a hideous dream.

The tip of my nose is burning still from the contact of his lips, and I long to pour out the history of my wrong to my aunt; but she sits with a face so pale and pained that in mercy to her I hold my unruly member in check.

‘Pearl, my dear!’

The address is ominous; she might just as well preface her discourse with ‘dearly beloved,’ for I feel that a sermon looms ahead, and resign myself at once. She speaks, too, in that ultra-sepulchral key to which she always descends whenever she is especially miserable.

‘Yes, aunt,’ I cry, as briskly and blithely as I can, with the hope of infusing a little cheerfulness into her.

‘The Count is a peculiar man!’ and she pauses to let me digest the fact before she enters into any detail of his peculiarities.

I bend my head in acquiescence.

‘And he has rather a peculiar manner, but it is *only* manner, I assure you. It is his nationality that is to blame, for Frenchmen are habitually gallant to ladies. Now, Pearl, I wish you to understand that, though he *talks* nonsense, he *means* nothing.’

Of course I guess the drift of her words—she is sorely afraid that I shall fancy I have made a conquest. The very idea of such a possibility makes the blood fly to my head, and in its upward course it splashes erratically all over my face, while my aunt, who at this moment is the very personification of an outraged British matron, scrutinises, with the gaze of a basilisk, my ill-timed and tell-tale rosiness.

‘Pearl, young inexperienced girls are so apt to get flattered into a liking—you must not really let the Count mislead you in that way. He is of a gay and volatile nature, and would not scruple to trifle with your feelings for the sake of a little amusement.’

‘Aunt!’ I answer severely, knitting my brow into creases and curling my lip, ‘you need not fear the Count’s flattery for me. All he says to me goes in at one ear and out of the other; it is a pity he should waste his sweetness on the desert air.’

She looks half inclined to be offended at the slighting way in which I speak of the choice of her maturity, and yet half satisfied that I am not a victim to his fascinations.

‘You should try to avoid being alone with him, then,’ she tells me, reprovingly.

‘I hate being alone with him—I never wish to speak to him again!’

But this she is too much in awe of him to enforce.

‘I do not say that, Pearl—I only want you to keep up your insular reserve; girls cannot be too careful, alas!’

She evidently knows her husband to be a ravening wolf, and she warns me accordingly; but she has not finished my catechism yet.

‘Has the Count been alone with you several times?’

Considering that I have been in Brussels now a period of nine weeks, and that during that time she has never but this once ceased watching me as a cat does a mouse, her last question appears a little superfluous; but jealousy is apt to confuse the brain, as I know, and therefore I humour her by saying,—

‘Never before to-day.’

‘And might I ask, Pearl, on what subjects you conversed?’

I smother a yawn in its birth. This continual harping on the Count waxes wearisome.

‘About no particular subject,’ I answer, indifferently; but the hydra-headed monster has his green eyes very wide awake now, and he will not be appeased and rest in peace.

My aunt compreses her thin lips so tightly together that their outline can barely be traced, and she believes me guilty and wickedly reticent about my shortcomings, so she comes valiantly to the point.

‘Pearl, I *desire* you to tell me if the Count took any advantage of the position?’

She has hunted me at last into a corner out of which there is no possible egress save by the utterance of a fib. But a white lie, upon which some look as a venial offence, in papa’s estimation was a grievous sin. Brought up to speak the truth, and nothing but the truth, fearlessly and frankly, I yet cannot help hesitating on this occasion—for *her* sake, for the sake of the poor devoted woman who has yielded herself to the worship of a false god, a god that is neither of wood nor of stone, but of the flesh, with all its worst attributes. My interlocutor anxiously awaits my response, and I have no alternative.

‘He kissed me, aunt.’

It comes like a thunder-clap, making her not white, but grey. She shivers and moans, and her forehead draws up into one huge furrow of suffering, and her mouth quivers out a sigh.

‘Oh, Pearl, you should not have let him.’

‘I caught it just here,’ I cry, hastily, rubbing the end of my nasal organ vigorously, as if to remove from it some speck or stain. I think she divines somehow that the salute was not to my liking, for she loses a little of her corpse-like hue, and taking my hand she draws me to her.

‘Child, I love you for poor Philip’s sake, and for your own. I would rather die than that any harm should befall you,’ she murmurs, passionately.

I do not know what evils she has conjured up as besetting my future path. As far as the Count is concerned I am safe. I feel strong and brave in a sense of rectitude, and I cannot quite control a slight contempt for the weak, nervous creature before me, whom I have seen quail beneath a pair of bold black eyes. It seems to me strange that a woman like her should not rise superior to the man she has married, and crush him down by dint of mere mental force.

‘What harm can befall me? Have I not you to take care of me?’

‘Yes, but I am not very powerful,’ she says, with a sickly attempt at a smile, and she holds out in a row ten painfully slender fingers, that appear very limp and nerveless. I bend down and kiss them heartily, nevertheless.

‘Well, then, you forget—there’s the Count,’ I remark, a little mischievously. ‘He is big enough in all conscience to take care of a dozen women like you and me.’

A sudden rush of colour suffuses my aunt’s face and throat. She clasps my two hands in her own with a wonderful strength that I did not give her credit for. Leaning forward in her chair, she fixes her eyes with a curious, scared expression in them full upon me, and with a gigantic effort she makes a clean breast of it.

‘Pearl, you are a good girl, and a very sensible girl; and you will understand and not blame me for forgetting the duties of a wife in warning you. Oh, Pearl!’ she hisses in my ear, after nervously glancing round the room, ‘*it is my husband—it is the Count that you have to fear the most!*’

CHAPTER XXVII.

A CLOVEN FOOT.

‘Heat not a furnace for your foe so hot
That it do singe yourself.’

IT was the zenith of sweet summer when I came—golden days on which the blue skies smiled. The trees were garbed in variegated green all picked out with a sheen of silver, and the Gloire de Dijon roses that clung to the wall at Glenthorn blushed beautifully as I sighed my regrets over their fragrant faces. The year is quite old now ; the foliage scant and seared with yellow melancholy. The bloom of the scented blossoms is gone, and their loveliness faded ; and a troop of vagrant leaves, wanderers whose fate depends on the capricious will of the four winds of heaven, flutter down on the bench in the park where Susanne and I sit on this raw November day. It is not bright here nor cheerful, but it is brighter and more cheerful than life in the Rue Royale. I fall into retrospection for want of something more lively to do. It is not possible that life can be made up of action alone. I think to myself that it would be impossible to give a true and unvarnished history of my existence ; for unconsciously I should make the startling events, such as great joys or the most poignant sorrow, form the picture ; while, in fact, my life really consists in a monotonous detail, in a dull ‘common round.’ I look back on my existence, and it strikes me as having been a very prosaic one, replete with variations, but always of the same tune. Still it does not appear to me as if my days had been uneventful ; I suppose it is because the leading features stand out sharp and well defined, out of the flat level and the neutral tints. All my petty feelings are swallowed up in the memory of one happiness, that presents itself as vividly as it did in the very first hour of its birth. I think that all the great events of my life have been crowded into a brief period, and that period was succeeded by a turbulent storm, after which a deep, dead calm has set in. The unenviable never-ending days of sameness which draw out the tenor of my existence here, when I do the same things,

think the same things, and hope and fear the same things, show so many blank pages of my mind. I try to philosophise, but in spite of my puny attempt at philosophy, it does seem a little hard to look around me, and to know that I am but a solitary atom, a miserable little scrap in the vast whole of humanity, with not one single tie binding me to the rest—to feel that I have completely missed my place in the world, and drawn a blank in the great lottery, and am no good to anyone else.

With no irreverence in my heart, I yet cannot help asking of my Creator why was I born?

‘Ah! it is you, mademoiselle.’

I turn away in annoyance from the speaker, dull as I feel. The Count’s presence throws no light on my darkness. He stands before me, curving his long back in a deferential bow; he is all to match, a spruce shining black, with nothing to prevent his being mistaken for a mute at a funeral, save the inevitable grey kids.

His ‘Ah! it is you,’ is meant to convince me that he has inadvertently crawled across my path—I say *crawled*, for he always reminds me of an obnoxious insect—but I feel certain that he has waylaid me. Since my poor deluded aunt, *les larmes à la voix*, bade me avoid him like a noisome pestilence I have done so to the best of my ability; but he has not lived to the age of half a century without learning to be a wily intrigant, and he drops down upon me in all kinds of ways, and in all sorts of out-of-the-way corners, in a Mephistolean fashion. My good Susanne still retains her plebeian reverence for folks with handles embellishing their names, in spite of her strange experience in the sphere of nobility, and its sister spirit, luxury. Her meagre lodging *au cinquième*, her scanty meals in the Rue Royale, have not succeeded in opening her eyes to the hollowness of the title which stamps aristocracy on my aunt’s meek brow, in the same sort of way that the Queen’s head adorns a spurious shilling. So she gets up quickly, and does her best curtsy before monsieur, a curtsy which at its best is only a ‘bob,’ or a ‘duck.’

‘Qui va à la chasse perd sa place,’ is an old French game that I used to play at with several small fry on a green at Versailles. The Count presents an illustration of it by sliding

forthwith into the seat on the bench that Susanne has vacated. He does not in the least mind her forming a trio, for he knows that her powers as a linguist do not extend further than the broadest of Flemish and the most execrable of French.

‘Mademoiselle, you spoke to me the other day of one Jacques La Porte.’

‘Yes,’ I answer, all curiosity and eagerness. I suppose the fact that I have been so terribly isolated from my relatives all my life makes me interested even in the bad ones.

He does not reply for a few moments.

‘Well, go on,’ I bid him impatiently.

‘I am so glad I have the power to rouse your interest somehow! I wish it was about myself,’ he murmurs, sentimentally, and he rolls his wide black eyes by way of giving them expression, until I think that he resembles one of those Chinese figures whose bodies are balls, and whose optics are regulated by the pulling of a hair in the pig-tail.

Sentiment is a thing that is perfectly irrelevant to Monsieur Jacques La Porte, so I frown and turn my back. To make me look round at him he lays a grey kid on my arm, but I shake it off quickly with a shudder, as if it were an obese toad.

‘*Revenons à nos moutons !* Pity that this should be such a remarkably black one,’ he continues at last. ‘I met some one lately who knew the fellow, and, remembering your anxious inquiries about him, I found out all I could,’ he says, with a broad smile.

‘Well?’

‘Well, mademoiselle, allow me to congratulate you, for you have something to be proud of. Your uncle is one of those highly-favoured individuals whom the country considers it necessary to sustain at its own expense.’

‘Do you mean that he is a felon?’ I whisper, not knowing exactly whether my duty leads me to be sorry or glad. A sense of shame, too, steals over me that I have rashly confessed to such disgraceful consanguinity before this nobleman, whose family is one of the high ones of the land, and whose escutcheon wears an unsullied face, according to my aunt.

‘Yes, mademoiselle—felon is an ugly word, but an expressive one. Monsieur La Porte boards and lodges in a jail,

and takes his daily constitutional on the uncomfortable treadmill. Poor devil! don't you pity him?'

'No, I don't!' I respond, stoutly and quickly. I shut my eyes for a moment, and picture my mother's delicate form shrinking from a ruffianly arm. In my excitement I can almost *hear* the blow that killed her! 'I am *glad* he suffers, and I hope, with all my heart, that he will suffer to the very end!'

A curious whiteness overspreads the Count's dark visage under the dim light of the autumnal sky—a livid purple hue comes over his lips, and I almost fancy that he grinds his large teeth close to my ear. A low, cynical laugh issues from him.

'Truly, mademoiselle is of a most angelic nature! How does your big Bible teach you? Does it bid you cherish revenge and malice, and all sorts of naughty passions like this?' he sneers. And his sneer goads me on.

'I cannot help it; there are some wrongs one can never forgive—*never*. I hate Jacques La Porte with a deadly hatred. I wish he was dead!'

The Count stares at my vehemence aghast, and actually shivers, and turns abruptly away from such an ebullition of wicked feeling.

'You shock me!' he ejaculates, in a righteous tone, that bears on it profound condemnation of my sentiments, and which succeeds in making me feel a little uncomfortable at the extent of my candour.

'If poor Jacques La Porte was at your mercy at any time, you would not be likely to show him much, mademoiselle. And yet you pretend to be a good Protestant! *Ma foi!* our church teaches tolerance to sinners, since we are sinning ourselves.'

I am annoyed at myself for having spoken my mind so freely, and rein up the licence I have foolishly allowed my tongue.

'I might show him mercy, or I might not—I cannot say,' I reply, coldly.

'Ah, mademoiselle, you are not as hard and relentless as you try to make me believe. Tell me, *chère enfant*, did you ever love?'

I open my eyes at his insolence, and feel inclined to resent it by words which will not be too flattering to his ears. Then I remember that he is my aunt's husband, and that he is master in the only home I can call my own.

'You are not my father confessor,' I reply, shortly.

'True, but I should like to be—or—rather, I would confess to you!' His voice is oily, his words are honeyed, and his eyes seek mine pertinaciously as he flounders into an extraordinary mixture of French and English.

'Do not look away, *mon ange*, but listen to me. *Si tu savais comme je t'aime*' (he has been studying Roberto, like Miss Græme). 'You see, it is not possible for me to adore *la vieille folle*, your respected aunt; but *you*!—ah! *ma belle, que vous êtes ravissante!*'

He stops, and I speak, but only three words find their way to my lips in reply to this ridiculous and impertinent rodomontade.

'Are you mad?'

'*Oui!*' he exclaims, ecstatically, throwing up a black glance at the gaunt arm of a tree that protrudes over our heads. '*I am fou—fou de toi, mademoiselle!*'

He stands up at this point, on the principle that perpendicular oratory is easier for the lungs. He places himself in a pose as if he were prepared to be photographed, his head inclining forward, as if the iron rest was fixed on to the back of it; his look steadily riveted on me, and five huge fingers, encased in grey kid, reposing on his ample breast. Claude Melnotte is not to be mentioned in the same breath with him as he begins,—

'I know a place where flowers and oranges and lemons flourish in winter-time—where the sun shines all day as well as the moon all night. It is the south—the beautiful south—the land of my birth and of my love!'

'I thought you told me you were a Parisian?' I say, sharply.

He comes down quickly from his flight to matter-of-fact.

'So I am. I meant to say the land of my adoption. Ah! mademoiselle, you should see it!'

'I may some day.'

‘Why not soon? Let us leave *la vieille folle, mon ange*—let us fly together!’

To this eloquent appeal he awaits an answer. My first impulse is to laugh outright; but then I recollect that for some time I have been singled out as the object of his attentions, and subjected to little trivial familiarities that have made the Cathcart blood bubble.

‘Mademoiselle, I am in earnest. If you can be happy with me, we will go away to the south together. Consent, *mon ange!*’ he whispers, fiercely, with his dark face all hot and glowing, and his eyes scorching me.

I lose my temper and cry, wrathfully,—

‘I have tried to be quiet,—to preserve towards you the civility due to you as my aunt’s husband,—but if you ever dare to address me as you have to-day, I will tell my aunt; and if that will not restrain you, I have friends who will *make* you understand the respect to which I am entitled. *Allons, Susanne!*’ And with this I hurl a withering look at him and turn on my heel.

But with a long stride he is quickly beside me, and with a harsh laugh he says, mockingly,—

‘Respect, indeed! *Sacrebleu!* the word is too absurd! What shall we hear next from the niece of a common felon—a jail-bird? Have a care, mademoiselle! If you dare to say one little word to set *la vieille folle* against me, I will make you repent it, as sure as I live!’

The last part of the sentence comes from him in a slow, fiendish tone, and he is the incarnation of a demon while he utters it. I shrink away from him involuntarily, and tremble all over, though I try to keep up a cool, self-possessed demeanour; and when I reach the Rue Royale, breathless and frightened to death, I am really glad to find a familiar face awaiting me—the face of my betrothed, Bertrand de Volnay.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

VISIONS OF THE FUTURE.

'It is to be all made of fantasy,
 All made of passion, and all made of wishes,
 All adoration, duty, and observance,
 All humbleness, all patience and impatience,
 All purity, all trial.'

BERTRAND is changed physically; he has developed considerably since I bade him adieu, now nearly thirteen months ago, in the little sitting-room at Château la Roche.

'A fine young man, and full of health,' my aunt remarks; and he *is* full of health—too full. The 'hope' on which he told me he was going to subsist has proved a remarkably nutritious diet. There is redundant bloom on his cheek, and he could exclaim like Hamlet with truth,—

'O that this too, too solid flesh would melt !'

I could not with the best endeavour rest my soul on him, but his square, stalwart figure looks like a wall of protection, and since my little scene with the Count in the park I have become a craven, and the very sound of his heavy tread brings on a shakiness of my limbs, and an incessant twitching of my facial organs, as though I were threatened with premonitory symptoms of St Vitus's dance. The Count and Bertrand have met, but the two natures do not amalgamate; and in this instance my betrothed has shown a discrimination and fastidiousness that have in a measure raised my opinion of him.

'How did you find me out here?' I ask, after Bertrand and I have shaken hands and gone through the formula of ordinary acquaintances; for it strikes me suddenly that I have never let him into the knowledge that I have left Glen-thorn and come to Brussels. He smiles a broad smile, a beaming smile, but not an intelligent smile to my thinking, as he replies,—

'It was cruel of you to keep me in ignorance of your

address, for I might have seen you long ago, Pearl; but I found it out.'

I notice that he has dropped the formal prefix of 'mademoiselle,' and it vexes me.

'But how did you find it out?' I question, sharply.

'I wrote to you, and the letter was returned with your present address written in pencil on a scrap of paper.

I wonder who can have made themselves so officious.

'And who was it that wrote it?'

'Correspondent unknown, but I think I have it here,' and he fishes out a bit of cream-laid delicately-tinted paper out of his pocket.'

Caligraphy small, cramped, and difficult to decipher. It is Miss Græme's handwriting, and a true index to her mind. The curiosity that lurks in her, and of which I had abundant proof, in this case must have led her to pry into my desk, else she could not have known Bertrand's direction. I am recalled from my musings by a pathetic voice.

'You are not sorry that I found you out, Pearl?'

'Oh dear, no!' I exclaim heartily, thinking only of the dreadful Count, until I see the light that breaks upon Bertrand's florid features at my words.

'And have you thought of me at all since we parted?' he says, in a romantic, whining tone, not forgetting the lopsided position of the head which always used to accompany his love-making.

'Of course, I have!' I reply with sincerity; but I do not think it necessary to add that I have thought of him in a way he might be inclined to object to.

My answers to his last two queries have been so satisfactory, that he appears both elated and complacent.

'And since we have been parted have you seen anyone you like better?—anyone you prefer to marry?'

'No one.'

This is a strictly true and very emphatic reply to the latter part of his sentence. There is no one *now* that I prefer marrying, since Sir Galahad is, or will be soon, Miss Græme's husband. All men in the world are cut out in the same pattern, moulded in the same mind as Bertrand—to me. After this confession on my part, Bertrand feels desirous of

changing his diet of hope for one of kisses. He bounces off his chair in a way that is more impulsive than graceful, to try to imprint on any part of my face which is most accessible a chaste salute. Fortunately for me the *convenances* on the Continent are so strict regarding the attitude of a young lady and her *fiancé* towards one another that he is not surprised when I draw back firmly, and reprove him for his audacity with a silent look that speaks volumes. He says nothing in extenuation of his conduct, but goes away and resumes his stool of penitence, with far less alacrity than he abandoned it, while a crest-fallen expression steals over his rosy countenance. Bertrand has arrived at the age of twenty-three years, but he always gives me the impression of a hobble-de-hoy, and it comes quite naturally to me to administer reproof to him as if I was his godmother.

‘You should not try to infringe the *convenances* so. It is very underbred of you,’ I remark, sternly.

‘Oh! I know it is; but I could not help it, Pearl, you look so pretty,’ he says, deprecatingly.

I am in the very act of relenting, on the principle that a soft answer turneth away wrath, when suddenly he plucks up courage, and with a defiant gleam in his eyes, cries, with the glee of a schoolboy,—

‘Oh! won’t I have plenty after we are married, just to make up for lost time.’

‘Bertrand!’ in a voice in which I condense all the feelings of horror, indignation, and astonishment, but it has no effect. He looks me steadily in the face, and smacks his lips, as if he were contemplating a nice bite of hardbake or some such stuff. I am too vexed to speak. I lean back in my chair, and give myself up to unpleasant reflections. What business has Bertrand to bring up the future in so vivid a fashion before me? He is quite aware that he has sinned past forgiveness, for he does not venture on more flights of folly, but rests passive and silent, red and puffy about his cheeks, and a shade sulky. I survey him calmly and deliberately. There sits my future lord and master, the man to whom I am going to vow all my love and all my obedience for the term of my natural life. There he sits, almost a clod, material from head to foot, different as night from day, both

externally and internally, to the ideal I have formed ever since I could reason, from—but no matter.

People form rash engagements, and the formal morality of the world, more careful of externals than of truth, declares it to be nobler for such rash engagements to be kept, even when the rashness is felt by the engaged—that honour may not be stained by a withdrawal. Thus the letter takes precedence of the spirit. To satisfy this prejudice a life is sacrificed, a miserable marriage rescues the honour, and no one throws the burden of that misery upon the prejudice.

Oh! surely marriage is a great responsibility, I think, as I go on looking my fill at my betrothed, a terrible responsibility; a bark in which two souls venture out on a stormy sea, with no aid but their own to help them; the well-doing of the frail vessel must in future rest upon themselves; no one can take part either to make their misery or mar their bliss! From my husband alone must flow all the happiness that I am destined to know. He is the only being I must care to please. All other men must be to me but shadows glancing on the wall! If Bertrand was only a *man* in his ways and thoughts, if he possessed the power even to crush me with anger and scorn at the base infidelity I have borne him, he would inspire me at least with respect, if I could not feel affection. I listen to him now as he prattles, having recovered the usual serenity of his temper.

‘Pearl, where shall we live when you become Madame Bertrand de Volnay?’ The name is a mouthful, and he pronounces it as pompously as though he were the Czar.

‘What do I care!’ I flare out impetuously.

‘Well, no, it does not much matter where we reside, so long as we are together,’ he replies, with supreme conceit, yet with a firm conviction in his words. ‘Only I thought it would be nice for us to talk a little about what we should do.’

‘Go on!’ I murmur, languidly, but with a certain curiosity lurking within me to discover what *are* the hopes, ambitions, and aspirations of my affianced.

‘If we had a nice little house somewhere in the Quartier Léopold—in this town?’

‘Well?’

‘Well, we could go to the theatre every evening, and on

Sundays we could drive in the Bois, and dine out of doors, at one of those little wooden tables, you know, that just do for two ; and, Pearl, there is such a good restaurant here for *écrevisses Bordelaises* !'

His countenance becomes perfectly effulgent as he mentions these last. I see at once that the sin of gluttony is strong within him. Solomon's admonition, 'Answer a fool according to his folly,' recurs to me, and saves me the trouble of composing a reply.

'Yes, the *écrevisses* will be perfectly delicious,' I drawl out with closed eyes, and with unction, as if I were trying then and there to realise the merits of shell-fish ; but I am heart-sick, unmistakably weary, as I think of the life that is in prospect for me—a life of which theatres and eating are to be the greatest embellishers.

'Cheer up, something may happen!' Jack's words, alluding to my marriage with Bertrand, return to me, but do not bring hope or consolation in their train, for as time wears on and on, and the period of my sacrifice is close at hand, the *something* dwindles into a very small possibility, while *certainly* expands into a mountain.

'Bertrand, in all these months, when you have had time to think, has it never occurred to you that we are not in the least sympathetic to one another?'

He opens his dark eyes very wide, and screws up his mouth as if I had given him a riddle to guess.

'Sympathetic? Why are we not?'

'How *could* we be, seeing that all our ideas and tastes are as different as chalk and cheese,' I say, petulantly ; my comparison is Hebrew to him, and he merely shakes his head. 'Bertrand, I *wish* you had other ideas—other tastes, if we *are* to be married.'

He turns upon me quickly with the exclamation,—

'Pearl, if you do not care about living in Brussels, why don't you say so? If you prefer Liège, I am sure I am quite willing to sacrifice my wishes to yours.'

'Oh, I do not care a bit *where* I live,—Liège or Brussels—it is all the same. I would just as soon go to Hong Kong!' I cry, for the chain bears down on me so very hard, and chafes me beyond all endurance ; and yet I know that, even if Ber-

trand proposed to break off our engagement, I should feel an undying regret that the promise I gave papa was unfulfilled. Still weak human nature requires a vent, and, like a true daughter of Eve, I try to get relief in little futile jerkings and kickings against the inevitable.

Bertrand's countenance is a perfect study, since he fancies that I have really suggested Hong Kong. He remembers perhaps my desire to go round the world, and believes that the trip is already in contemplation. There is no love of research about him; his soul is not above Belgium, in the circumscribed soil of which he has so long vegetated and fattened.

'I do not know about Hong Kong,' he says, meekly and ruefully, and a little doubtfully.

'Don't you?—then I'll tell you. Hong Kong, an island in China; population—large; climate—hot; produce—bamboos, jos-sticks, ginger, tea, and candy,' I answer, brushing up my recollection of Mangnall's Questions for his benefit.

'Ginger, tea, and candy—these sound nice!' he observes, with an evident hankering after the flesh-pots of the Egyptians.

There is a pause, during which, in spite of my unhappiness, I can scarcely forbear a smile at the curiously-puzzled expression on his face, as if he were trying to arrive at something. This is the result of his efforts.

'But, Pearl, we can get ginger, tea, and candy in Brussels. I am not certain about the bamboo and the jos-sticks, but we could send for them. It would be cheaper than going.'

'Vil Bourgeois!' I mutter to myself. I scorn him for his vulgar allusion to pounds, shillings, and pence, and show my contempt.

'Cheaper!—that is all you think of. You never consider that I have seen nothing of the world—that I am sick and weary of the horrid little space I have been caged in. Oh, how I wish I was Noah's dove!' I sigh, plaintively, thinking how pleasant it would be to fly away and be at rest.

Bertrand is not a man of letters by any means. His knowledge of Biblical history is deficient, and his inquiring mind again works actively.

'And *who* is this Noah?' he questions, jealously and tartly, with an angry gleam in his eyes and a flushed face.

‘The owner of a very large vessel indeed,’ I reply, quietly.

‘What is he like?’ he says, imperiously. Remembering a highly-coloured engraving of the ark and its owner which was one of my most valued possessions in childhood, I describe him.

‘A remarkably benevolent countenance, with a long and luxuriant beard falling low over his breast; florid in complexion, like yourself.’

Bertrand bites his nails in impotent wrath while I dilate on the attractions of his fancied rival, and to appease him I add,—

‘But perhaps you are not so old-fashioned looking as he.’

‘I am glad of that,’ he says, recovering his equanimity.

‘But, Pearl, don’t talk about him—it stabs me to the heart!’

I glance at his chest, and think that the stab must be deep indeed. Shylock might have claimed several pounds of flesh, and my robust *fiancé* would have lost them with advantage.

‘I should like you to tell me a little about your life in England,’ he asks me.

My life in England, where my guardian and I were together—where my guardian and I parted! I groan in bitterness of spirit.

‘It was a dream, from which I have awakened,’ I reply, sadly and vaguely; and I think of what Shakespeare says—

‘Dreams are the children of an idle brain,
Begot of nothing but vain fantasy;
Which is as thin of substance as the air,
And more inconstant than the wind.’

‘What sort of a dream was it?—a nightmare?’ Bertrand jars in with a laugh, and a feeble attempt at a joke; but he has managed to hit the right nail on the head, without intending to do so.

I think of Miss Græme—of the fair one with the golden locks who has carried off my prince.

‘Yes, a nightmare—a horrible, hideous nightmare!’ I cry, savagely. Then I add plaintively, with all my soul in my request—‘Bertrand, promise me never to allude to my life in England after you and I are married. I was very unhappy

there at times, and the remembrance makes me wretched. If you really care for me, you will promise me this.'

He becomes quite benign as he hears my softened voice, and visibly puffs out with a sense of self-sufficiency and magnanimity.

'Rely on me,' he says, with just a shade of patronage and priggishness. 'I shall never allude to the subject in question, or speak on any matter that I find is distasteful to you, Pearl.'

And thus I arrange to put my dead past right out of my sight.

CHAPTER XXIX.

M A D E L O N.

'The venom clamours of a jealous woman
Poison more deadly than a mad dog's tooth.'

'JEAN.'

I pause at the door of the *salon*—I have no mean desire to listen, but I hesitate to enter where the Count is. We leave to-day for the country, and I have hurried down, in the midst of preparation for the journey, to ask my aunt some questions relative to the packing.

'*Où, ma chère.*'

This is the first time that I have heard him address her so familiarly and affectionately, and I rejoice for her sake that he has come to his proper senses.

'*Tu viens aussi à la campagne ?*'

It is not my aunt after all, it is *Madelon* who speaks, the unmistakable sing-song accents of a low-class Marseillaise ! I start as the intimate *tu toi* falls upon my ear, for from a hireling to her master the liberty is unwarrantable, even if she has served him long. A thought that *Madelon* is a relation of the Count suggests itself—that she may be his mother, but in the next instant the idea appears ridiculous, for in spite of the hard features and the thick lines furrowing her face, *Madelon's* years I guess to be within ten of his.

'*Je le crois bien*,' he answers, in the same nasal twang, and it fits his tongue admirably.

'Jean!' The woman appears to hesitate a moment, as if she was afraid of him, afraid to speak out her mind. 'You have been at home much more lately than you used to be—it is not on account of that English miss?'

'I *hate* the English miss! I should like to thrash the life out of her!' he growls, bearishly.

I cannot help shuddering as in imagination I see his great brawny arm bearing down upon me. I am afraid to move from the threshold, lest they should hear me, yet I would give a good deal to be safely back in my attic.

'Oh! she has not been amiable to you—I like her for that,' Madelon chuckles with satisfaction.

'Do not laugh too soon, *ma chère*, or I will make her amiable and you jealous,' he answers, roughly.

'Have a care, Jean. I have a tongue, and I know a secret or two,' she says, defiantly.

'And you know how much licence that tongue of yours can take. I have taught you so much, I think. You women are regular devils, and I would like to hang you all up by one string,' he remarks, philanthropically.

'If you dislike women so, you were a fool to hamper yourself with more than one,' she tells him sharply.

'It is not very difficult to rid oneself,' in a meaning tone.

I do not know if this avowal has any influence over Madelon, but she stops speaking for a little while.

'Jean,' she recommences in a milder voice, 'about this English miss.'

'Well, *what* of her?' he interrupts, coarsely.

'Only does she suspect anything about us?—has she said anything?'

'No, not a word. Suspect!—is it likely, when you and I are so thoroughly different in appearance? I, a Count, a lion of society, *chic* all over, rich and handsome—what could I possibly have in common with a hard-featured, ill-favoured, slatternly cook like you?' he demands, with vain, vaunting tones.

Madelon heaves a deep sigh in response to his insulting

talk. Then she says, in a voice in which I can detect tenderness and sadness,—

‘It is quite true what you say, Jean! You who are so fashionable and so handsome, you could not be expected to have anything in common with a poor servant like me!’

He relents at her tone, I suppose, or else it is his policy that makes him wish to salve her wounded feelings.

‘Madelon, don’t be stupid. Of course what I said was only *bêtise*. You know I care for you always the same!’

‘Do you, Jean?’ And in the gladness of her heart she knocks about the things she is arranging in the *salon* so noisily that under cover of the clatter I make my escape. Once within the safe sanctuary of four plaster walls and a rusty old bolt, I sit down indifferently on sundry hard and uneven packages with which my narrow couch is bestrewed, while my feet negligently dangle on the bonnet that lies in the open portmanteau. My mind is far too busy for me to take heed of my body. The strange conversation below has surprised me beyond measure, and grieved me as well, for in it I find another and potent reason that my aunt’s life should be a purgatory. After deep reflection, I come again to the conclusion that Madelon is the Count’s mother; unless, indeed, and which on second thoughts strikes me as more probable, that the Count is Madelon’s father. Either of these relationships would fully account for the terms they use in addressing one another, and for the understanding which seems to exist between them. I determine not to mention the matter to my aunt, for it would be cruel to add to her troubles, but to Bertrand I am more communicative.

‘You look very flushed and excited; is anything the matter?’ he asks me when he arrives a little later at the house, but not late enough for me to have got rid of all signs of commotion.

‘Lots!’ I reply, pithily, but comprehensively.

‘With you?’ he inquires in solicitude.

I think that caution and mystery, like the measles, must be contagious. I have seen so much of the two here that unconsciously I lower my voice and look round furtively.

‘Not with me. I have found out something!’

‘What?’ Bertrand whispers back, having taken the initiative.

‘Madelon and the Count!’

‘Oh!’ he ejaculates, with a laugh, and it angers me that he should make merry at the expense of my aunt’s comfort and peace.

‘Why do you laugh?’ I ask, angrily.

‘I can’t help it,’ he says, stuffing his handkerchief into his mouth to stop himself.

‘It is no matter for laughing. It is *dreadful*!’ I exclaim, indignantly, all my patrician prejudices roused at the undue familiarity I have discovered. I am conservative to the backbone, like papa, and uphold distinction among the classes. It would be a sorry world if the eagle were to mate with the poor brown linnet, or the lion herd with the pig, and lord and vassal should preserve the line that divides them intact; but I do not say this to Bertrand, for what is bred in the bone comes out in the flesh, and his proclivities are not patrician by any means.

After he has nearly swallowed his handkerchief in order to gain gravity, he takes my hand.

‘Pearl,’ he says, ‘why do you not marry me at once, and leave this household? It is not a fit one for you.’

The ‘thrashing’ which the Count has held out for me in the distance comes into my mind, and for a moment I am half tempted to agree to Bertrand’s proposition; but leaving all the unpleasantness of the alternative out of the question, I consider it right to be staunch in my adherence to my aunt for the present, on the practical ground that, at any rate, she and I will be two to one, in case the Count proves obnoxious and aggressive to either of us.

‘There is nothing to prevent our marriage,’ Bertrand argues. ‘It is only hastening it by a few months after all.’

I collapse and shiver, and turn a little white as well, for he goes on,—

‘I do believe the very idea of marrying me makes you feel ill. Yet you said you would try to love me, Pearl.’

And I promised papa that I would not close my heart against this man.

‘I *will* try, Bertrand, and I daresay I shall succeed—by-and-by, you know.’

‘When?’

‘Marriage will bring love, perhaps,’ I murmur, ashamed of the falsehood I am telling.

‘Then let the marriage be at once. My father wants it so much, Pearl! He is very old, and he has no one but me in the world, and he says he wants to see me happy before he dies. I shall *never* be happy until I get you, though!’ he cries, just like a child who insists on a kite or a hobby-horse, that the measure of his happiness may be completed. But I am obdurate, and turn a deaf ear even to the old father’s wish to behold his son’s joy before he closes his eyes on the world.

‘I cannot leave my aunt just yet; she is ill—she wants me;’ and I decide the question.

I say good-bye to my betrothed, and the last I see of him as the train puffs out of the station for Namur is a wistful expression on his features, and a sickly autumnal beam falling on his uncovered head; but as we whiz along his face disappears, not only from view, but from memory.

We leave the train at Namur to walk to our destination. My aunt’s gaunt figure, robed in a long waterproof, stalks along, and the wooden box containing our jewellery is firmly grasped in both her hands. The Count regards it suspiciously, and offers to relieve her of her burden; but she gives it quickly to my care, and bids me, by a glance, to be vigilant; so to obey her I hold on to it like grim death, and intercept a meaning glance between the Count and Madelon.

‘A tumble-down old place.’ Bradshaw’s descriptions are not so graphic as this one of Jack’s when he spoke of my aunt’s country residence—or *château*, as she calls it. True, there’s not much in a name; but though a rose would smell as sweet by any other name, it would require an immense stretch of imagination to exalt this into anything superior to a good-sized hovel. The dilapidation of some parts of it reminds me of dear old La Roche; but instead of the glossy leaves and tender-hued blossoms of the peach-trees, the heaps of flowers that formed a sunny bit of landscape round us, here there is stubbly grass, full of ill weeds that grow apace, crop-

ping up bravely in some places, and trodden under foot in others, while floriculture is an art unknown. The house is a square and whitewashed building, with a sloping slate roof, and the interior corresponds in meanness to the exterior.

The Rue Royale *au troisième*, with its spindle-legged chairs and battered sofa, its attics and its utter disregard of comfort, was princely in comparison with this; and even Susanne, in spite of the leaven of toadiness in her nature, wears an air of disapproval at our surroundings. My aunt is white and weary, and she asks for 'tea.' It is the refreshing beverage that the female portion of Great Britain affect most, and her insular habits stick to her. I, too, look forward to its cheering influence, but Madelon is obstinate.

'*Pas encore !*' she snarls, as my aunt, in a meek voice prefers her request.

'*Dieu ! moi aussi je suis fatiguée.*'

I rise indignant, and remonstrate in French,—

'Your mistress is very tired, and she requires some nourishment, Madelon.'

'My mistress can speak for herself,'—she lays a decided stress on the word *mistress*; 'and I do not take orders from such as you!' she cries, turning a defiant look towards me.

Of course the Count has told her of my relationship to the felon, Jacques La Porte, and this is the result. I shrink into half my natural size, my mushroom dignity dispersed to the four winds; my face and neck in a blaze with shame and mortification, that is increased tenfold by a twinkle in the woman's eye. My aunt never attempts to reprove her—she only murmurs, feebly,—

'Never mind, Madelon, I can wait.'

Her answer is a contemptuous glance, and, with her head erect, Madelon marches out of the room.

'How can you put up with such fearful insolence?' I ask my poor wan relative when we are alone, for the Count has gone out ever since we arrived.

'I cannot help myself, Pearl,' she says, wearily. 'Madelon has been for so many years in the Delaville family, that she presumes on it. When I first married I showed my annoyance at being treated with such disrespect, but the Count told

me that he could not allow so old and faithful a servant to be scolded or coerced in any way, so of course I gave in to his wishes.'

'You are his wife, *she* is only his paid servant, and you are the one to be considered,' I reply, scornfully.

As I do so, I catch Madelon's eye. She has crept noiselessly back into the room, and I know that the conversation will be reported to the Count. The malignity of her eye is not to be described. I feel myself grow hot and cold all over with a sense of impotent fury choking me.

'Mademoiselle has no business to try to make mischief between madame and me,' she says, slowly, with a cool assumption that takes me aback for a moment, but I rally.

'No business!—what are you thinking of?'

'Yes, you have no business to do so. If I am a servant, there is nothing against me or my family,' she asserts, loudly.

'What can you mean by talking like this!' my aunt questions, nervously, horror-struck at the unjustifiable tone the creature has adopted. 'You forget who you are. Go out of the room.'

'I don't forget who I am, or who *you* are,' she answers, sharply; 'a parcel of English *canaille*!' she mutters, audibly, as she walks out.

My aunt and I stare at one another aghast. We have arrived at a pretty pass, when the caterpillars of creation, as the *ancien régime* designated servants, can keep us in awe. My aunt lies back on her pillow crying silently, but the largest tears I have seen in my life roll down her thin white cheeks; she feels that she is bound hand and foot to the wheel—bound by both love and fear to her ruffianly husband. I go to her and slip my arm round her neck, and a tear and a smile struggle together on her face. Madelon's case, I feel, is hopeless, so I say no more on the subject, and my aunt does not allude to it either—wounded that I should be a witness of her deep humiliation.

CHAPTER XXX.

TWO SCRAPS OF PAPER.

'Such is the fate of guilt—to make slaves tools,
And then to make 'em masters—by our secrets.'

THE suicidal month of November is on its wane ; the days are gloomy and the nights are dark, and life in the country assumes a wofully dreary aspect. The leaves have almost left the trees, the flowers and shrubs are reaching decay ; the woods and groves are silent, and the sun himself seems to have gradually withdrawn his light, or to have become enfeebled in his power. Who is there at this moment that is not impressed with melancholy when the thought comes that the leaves are falling like our years, the flowers fading like our hours, the clouds fleeting like our illusions, the sun growing colder like our affections, the river becoming frozen like our lives ! And at my aunt's château there is nothing to turn my reflections into a more cheerful groove. Rain patters down continually on the slate roof, rain beats mercilessly against the old plaster walls and upon the weird-looking trees. It is not Longfellow's rain, gentle, balmy, and refreshing, but a good, hard, relentless pelt, that knocks the brightness out of everything.

Books are rarities in the household, and for work I have no turn, so I sit idly and a little repining, a martyr to untoward circumstances ; for, in truth, my lot is cast no more in pleasant places. Socially speaking, I might as well be stranded on a desert isle. The Count, at the very furthest corner of the room, is engrossed in writing, and my aunt, white and silent, puts me in mind of Lot's wife transformed into a pillar of salt. It is the hour for the midday meal, and I gladly hail it, although nature is not especially vociferous in her claims, but even the rustle of the table-cloth is an agreeable break. Madelon, grim and cross-featured, deposits the large tureen of boiling *bouillon* on the table, and we await the

advent of the head of the family to begin ; but he goes on writing, and is too much absorbed in his occupation even to notice that his favourite viands, redolent of garlic and grease, are waxing cold, and he gives a visible start when my aunt calls 'Jean !'

The last sheet he has written is evidently unsatisfactory, for he tears it up, and stuffs it hurriedly into his pocket as he rises from his seat. Then he carefully puts away his letters in his desk and locks it. Appetite on such a day as this is not to be thought of—the weather is bad enough to drive it away. Even the Count feels its influence, for he leaves a pet *salmi* untouched, and his bottle of Bordeaux undrained.

My aunt is never loquacious, but to-day, in her silence and absorption of mind, she might pass the board of the Deaf and Dumb Institute. We go through the meal because it is feeding time, and when it is over we retire to our respective corners. The window near which I sit is at the back of the house, and it gives on to a large, rough field that Madelon utilises as a drying-ground. My eyes, for want of something better to do, watch the garments that are hung up all in a row, and flapping backwards and forwards in the wind like so many bleached corpses on a gibbet, and I wonder to myself on what principle Madelon exposes them to the rain to get them dry. She herself, impervious to the weather, as she appears to be to everything else, meanders quietly in and out of the clothes-line, inspecting the merits of her handicraft.

Penned up in this small square room, I begin to envy her the freedom of fresh air, in spite of its concomitant discomfort, rain, and contemplate a turn myself ; but, just as this happy thought strikes me, the Count, having sealed his letters, pushes his chair noisily back and prepares to leave the room. When he is fairly gone I breathe more freely, and the atmosphere seems to grow so much lighter and more wholesome that I determine to delay my projected promenade until sunset, when the skies may possibly clear.

The hours lag heavily as the afternoon wears on. Then comes a slight redness about the horizon, and then a dull greyness hanging like a mist over the earth, and the November sun has gone down to his rest. I rise and strain my eyes in all directions, heavenward, and think that I can detect just a

faint line breaking the mass of feathery clouds. My surmise regarding the weather has proved correct. I put my hand out of the window, and not a drop falls into my palm. Gathering up my skirts tightly, and wrapped in my aunt's huge black waterproof, I sally out. Here in the heart of the country, so to speak, *les convenances* and chaperons are dragons unknown, so I walk briskly, for the mere sake of walking, down the road, and hope by the aid of exercise to do away with the feeling of utter stagnation that is overpowering me. Engrossed in the past and the future, I do not note the flight of time in the present, and I am forced to return home through the drying-field, by way of avoiding the long, circuitous route by the road; and when I reach the field it is dark, but not so dark as to render invisible to my sharp eyes two figures that stand close together. I have heard that instinct often reveals the proximity of an enemy. Instinct tells me now in a trice that the two figures are those of the Count and Madelon, before I have time to examine them.

I stand perfectly still where I am, and where the trunk of a large tree partially hides me, in the hope that their speedy departure from the spot will release me from my durance vile. I cannot make out their words, though their gestures are plainly discernible, and the hum of their voices audible. The Count talks volubly, then his voice drops lower, and his enunciation becomes slower and more impressive; while his companion, the outline of whose head is defined against the horizon, never seems to move her gaze from him.

The colloquy lasts for a considerable time, during which period I freeze, for an *al fresco* entertainment in the month of November is scarcely a thing to be desired. At last the colloquy ends,—but how? The tall figure of the Count takes a curve, and his head bends lower and lower until his lips rest on Madelon's forehead. And Madelon—cold, hard, undemonstrative Madelon, flings her arms passionately round his neck. She remains for a minute in this picturesque attitude—a *tableaux vivant* enacted impromptu for my whole and sole benefit. And then the Count goes, with his long, swinging step, towards the house; while the woman, with a letter in her hand, runs quickly down a narrow path that skirts the far end

of the field, and that leads to a small village, where there is a diminutive chapel and a post-office.

When the coast is quite clear, and I may venture without running into danger, I emerge quickly from my hiding-place. I feel nervous and flurried, and pick my way slowly over the drenched ground, and as I pass the exact spot where the loving tryst was held, two scraps of white paper gleam through the dusk from out of the mud. Mechanically I stoop and pick them up, and, holding them close to my eyes, I perceive that the writing is familiar. It is an old letter of Jack's, torn in half; and, without stopping in my walk, I put the fragments into the pocket of my dress. I am full of the scene I have witnessed. The Count's kiss, and Madelon's passionate embrace in return, were scarcely paternal and filial in their nature. My whole being is in revolt as I reflect on the horrible treachery and deception which this worthless pair flaunt almost in my aunt's face.

The Count sits and sips his *café au lait* slowly and calmly as I enter; but my glance is keen, and I mark that under the lamp-light his dark, olive skin is of a sickly yellow, while the spoon that he holds tintilates slightly in his fingers. He rises to retire early in the evening, on the score of fatigue, and as Madelon hands him a candle near the door, his black eyes question her.

'*C'est fait*,' she whispers, but not too low to escape my vigilance; and as she says it, a strange and scared look starts over her white face.

CHAPTER XXXI.

ON THE TRACK.

‘Behold her guilty looks ; for guilt will speak,
Though tongues were out of use.’

‘READ this letter, Pearl.’

My aunt’s voice has sunk to its lowest ebb, and she looks thinner and more woebegone than is even her wont, as she tosses me over a letter from my cousin Jack.

Kept awake last night by the dreary howling of the wind, and the still more dreary train of thought into which I fell, I am very late for the matutinal repast which, in obedience to the golden rules, is ordinarily at the primitive hour of eight. As I walk into the room I see that the others have finished, leaving a fragment of cold omelette, a tough piece of toast, and a cup of tepid coffee for my benefit. The viands don’t look attractive or *appétissants*, and I am in no hurry to begin upon them, so that when my aunt speaks in a tone that is decidedly ominous of something, I immediately push my untasted breakfast aside, and fall to the perusal of Jack’s missive, that appears to me to be a more voluminous one than he usually sends, written in a careless hand, with uncrossed t’s and undotted i’s, with blots and outlandish flourishes, that have an appearance of Egyptian hieroglyphics, and an utter disregard of punctuation ; but it yet contains considerable matter for astonishment and reflection, and runs thus :—

‘MY DEAREST MOTHER,—I received your letter with a request for £20, which sum I hasten to enclose. I trust you have suffered no inconvenience through the want of it, and that you and Pearl are well. You will be sorry to hear that I am a bit of a loser to the amount of some hundreds drawn on Messrs Denham by a forged check. I can almost forgive the rascal for his villainy, for the clever way in which he imitated

my pot-hooks and hangers, which, to say the least, are peculiar. The Scotland Yard folks don't at all despair of tracing the delinquent, especially as they telegraphed at once to their Continental brethren, having an idea that the fellow may be across the water. But I am a brute for bothering you with my troubles, since you have a good many of your own to worry. Love to Pearl. What a wonderful comfort she must be to you,—Your affectionate,
JACK.'

Twice slowly and deliberately I go through this letter. A dozen ideas flash through my brain. I look round the room and out of the window—not a soul is to be seen save my aunt, who, blue with cold, and with a harassed expression on her features, sits watching my countenance.

'Are you not sorry for Jack?' she asks. 'He is so good and so liberal, that it is a shame he should be defrauded. I am afraid they'll never catch the man, for those London sharpers are so very clever,' she goes on, in a quiet, ruminative tone.

'They do not think it is a London sharper, but a foreign one, aunt. I hope he will be caught and well punished too,' I cry, vehemently, for her placidity vexes me. I see, plainly enough, that Jack, the best son in the world, holds only a very secondary place in the heart that bows down in idolatry to that graven image of Satan, her husband. 'Have you shown this to the Count?' I inquire.

'Oh yes.'

'Well, and what did he think of it? Did he offer any opinion as to whether the forger is likely to be found?'

'Oh no; he only just glanced through it, being in a hurry to catch the train. The twenty pounds that Jack sent came in most opportunely, for Jean was in terrible want of funds for his journey, although the loss of it to me is a little serious just now. You and I will have to struggle through somehow, Pearl!'

She tells me with the sound of a gulp in her throat, and a forced smile on her mouth.

'It was rather a sudden proceeding on the Count's part to leave by so early a train, was it not? Had you any idea of his movements last evening?' I inquire, indifferently.

'Oh dear, no! not the faintest. He had a letter from his family this morning, he told me, requiring his immediate presence in the south of France, on very urgent business. Poor Jean, he was quite flurried, I assure you,' she says, in a sympathising tone.

'I daresay he was,' I reply, pointedly, but my aunt might be a thick wall as far as understanding me. I am, however, all suspicion within, and counting two and two I make four.

The Count took away by force a letter of Jack's from my aunt's safe-keeping, now nearly two months ago. Last week he and Madelon kept a tryst in the drying-field, and when it was over Madelon posted a letter. The scraps of Jack's letter that I picked up must have dropped accidentally from the Count's pocket after he had copied the signature.

The twenty pounds drained from Jack's purse will pay for the forger's flight, for, of course, the forger is my aunt's husband; but how can it be proved?

'Aunt, where is Madelon, is she gone too?' I question on the spur of the moment, utterly forgetting that my aunt knows nothing and suspects nothing. To me the Count and Madelon are such birds of a feather that I jump at once to the conclusion that they must be herding together.

'Why, what an extraordinary question, Pearl! Of course, Madelon is in the kitchen, I suppose. Why should she be gone as well?'

Where ignorance is bliss, it would be cruel to make her wise.

'Of course, I really do not know what I was talking about!' I reply, with a half smile, shutting my eyes as though I were only half awake, but in reality I am trying to clear my mental vision of any cobwebs that may obscure it. Suddenly a thought strikes me, and I run to my room in double-quick haste. Arrived there, I plunge my hand into the pocket of a dress that I have left carelessly hanging up in an old cupboard; from it I extract the two scraps of Jack's old letter that I picked up on the evening of my walk home through the drying-field, and which from that time to this have escaped my memory. Now, I examine them well, and, lo and behold! stuck to one piece, by a mixture of mud and wet, is a portion of the count's ordinary writing-paper,

with his crest and crown in one corner, and underneath the signature, J. Temple, in two different hands. I place the precious scraps, just as they are, mud and all, carefully into an envelope, seal the packet, and the proof of the Count's guilt is safe in my keeping.

Armed with this knowledge, I make a raid into the kitchen where Madelon reigns supreme, wielding an imperious sceptre—a very ogress to unwary intruders into her territory. She sits all huddled up in an old woollen shawl, gazing out on the dreary prospect. The snow lies several inches thick on the ground, and her features are blue and pinched with the sharp wintry wind that whistles freely through the large cracks in the dilapidated door; but she does not appear to heed the elements, or to attempt to approach the fireplace for warmth.

When she sees me enter she puts on a heavy, sullen look, and turns her head away with a gesture of annoyance and indignation.

On my way to the kitchen I have hatched a little plot in my brain which has pure philanthropy for its base and summit, and which therefore ought to succeed. I think that if I can in any way reveal to Madelon the knowledge of the Count's guilt, and her complicity in it, I may in a manner force her through fear to a more gentle and amiable demeanour towards my poor aunt. So I begin without further ado, in a sharp, quick tone, which I must confess is put on to some extent, since this woman, like her master, inspires me with a curious sort of apprehension that reason does not enable me to shake off. I press the envelope that rustles in my bosom close, in order that that may give me a better courage, and the thought that I am acting in the cause of humanity, in the cause of the oppressed, strengthens me for the encounter.

'Madelon!'

No answer. She gives a violent jerk to her body, and changes her position—that is all. I look at her for a moment. She appears as if hewn in rock, and with no more expression on her face than if it was cast in iron.

'Madelon!' I reiterate, with double energy, taxing my lungs to their full extent, 'I wish to speak to you.'

'I have no time to waste in talking,' she mutters, without turning her head.

‘It is about the Count!’

The effect is electrical. All resemblance to rock and cast-iron vanishes. She stands before me, the deep purple blood coursing over her face and neck, and her eyes staring hard at me.

‘What about *him*?’ she asks, almost humbly.

‘Do you know where he is gone?’

She eyes me for an instant suspiciously, but I preserve a perfectly blank expression.

‘*Ma foi mon!*’ she answers, but the purple blood gives place to a deathly bluish white, and to hide her agitation she begins stirring vigorously at some savoury compound in a large saucepan.

‘Put that saucepan down and listen to me,’ I order, imperatively.

She opens her eyes and mouth at such unparalleled audacity on my part, but something she reads in my face makes her drop her gaze, although she loses her temper.

‘There!’ she exclaims, and bang goes the innocent saucepan on the floor, with the savoury compound running in greasy streams in all directions.

I let her cool for a minute; then I go on, calmly and quietly,—

‘When you were so insolent the other day, and alluded to my family, what did you mean by it, Madelon?’

She laughs harshly.

‘Mademoiselle, as I told you just now, I have no time to waste in talking. Please go out of the kitchen.’ And she makes a step forward, as though she had half a mind to compel me to obey her command, and vacate the premises.

For all answer I plant myself more firmly against the wall, and look at her, with scorn and defiance.

‘Tell me what you meant by your allusions?’ I ask.

‘*Parbleu!* I meant that you had an uncle who was a convict, mademoiselle. There, as you are so curious, you have the information you want. Now go,’ she bids me, insolently.

‘Not so fast, Madelon. I shall go when I have given *you* some information about the Count in return.’

She regularly bleaches this time—a deadly pallor creeps

up her face, right up to the roots of her hair, and she never speaks a word.

‘You posted a letter from the village near this one day last week, Madelon?’

‘Well, what of that? I post several letters a week,’ she answers, coolly, but the frightened look still dilates her pupils.

‘Yes, but that letter was a very important one, and in spite of the wet weather you took it down yourself to the post-office when it was dark. Madelon, before I say anything more about that letter, you must tell me what you are to the Count.’

‘I am his servant, mademoiselle.’

‘Yes; but a servant does not usually address her master by his Christian name—a servant does not take the liberty of calling him *tu* and *toi*!’

She holds her tongue, but fixes her gaze on me.

‘And, Madelon, a servant does not usually put her arms round her master’s neck while he kisses her.’

‘*Vous mentez, mademoiselle!*’ she flares out, unblushingly.

‘I saw you do it with my own eyes,’ I say, slowly. ‘Now, tell me honestly if you are a relation of the Count’s? Is he your father?’

She vouchsafes no reply, but only curls her lip at me.

‘Are you his mother?’

There must be something Jesuitical in my nature, for I have, without premeditation, touched woman’s most vulnerable point—vanity, and it is the best move I could have made.

‘Am I then so old that you should take me for his mother?’ she cries, indignantly.

‘Perhaps you are his sister, then?’

‘*Non, mademoiselle.*’

‘Then, Madelon, I have no hesitation in saying that you are a bad woman, and not fit to be in the same house with my aunt and me!’

She turns upon me like a fury, her features inflamed with passion, her lips trembling and her utterance thick.

‘Not fit to be in the same house with you!—with your aunt! *Ma foi!* It is she—*la vieille folle*—that is bad, for I am Jean’s real wife, while *she* is—’

She stops short at the sight of my face of horror. Oh! my

poor aunt ! I see at once that she is a miserable dupe—that she has been beguiled into a fictitious marriage with this rascal Count, to satisfy his rapaciousness, his horrible cupidity, in order that he and the woman Madelon should reap the benefit of the legacy left by Jack's father to his widow. I feel that it would kill my aunt with shame to know this—to know that her life, pure to austerity, has been all wasted, her name sullied, her honour and reputation swept remorselessly away.

Madelon paces the kitchen with giant strides—the embodiment of a tiger-cat.

‘I shall go up and tell the truth to madame. She shall not believe me bad, as you do. Now Jean is leagues away, safe and sound, it does not matter what *la vieille* knows, or what she thinks of him,’ she says, stamping her broad foot, encased in heavy wooden *sabots*, with a clatter on the floor ; but I am equal with her here.’

‘Keep quiet in the kitchen, Madelon, or it will be worse for you,’ I say, determinedly.

‘I told you once before that I should take no orders from such as you. I tell you so again, mademoiselle. I am going up to madame, and at once!’

‘And I tell you, Madelon, that you *shall* take your orders from me, and that you will do nothing of the kind. You will not *dare* to reveal a word of all this to my aunt!’

‘Dare!—I dare everything!’ she says, tossing her head, and with a brazen face. I can quite believe her ; and in my heart I shrink from her with dread, but outwardly I am calm. I walk up to the door, and then I turn. I have made up my mind to throw my trump card.

‘Madelon, if you do not keep this wretched story from my aunt, I will not keep silence either. Your husband has forged, and I hold the proof of his guilt. Keep *your* counsel, and I promise to keep mine!’

In a moment the woman is down on her knees before me, lifting up clasped hands.

‘Pardon, mademoiselle, if I was insolent. Madame shall not hear a word, I swear! And you—you will not set them on his track? My poor Jean! It would break my heart if anything happened to him. I am only a *paysanne*, mademoiselle, but still I have feeling ; and I love my husband as

much—no, far more, than you fine ladies love. *Promise, mademoiselle, that you will keep silent, and let him go in peace.*

‘That will do, Madelon,’ I answer, sternly, for, in spite of her emotion and sorrow, I cannot find any kindness in my heart for her. ‘My silence depends entirely on your discretion,’ and I walk away without looking towards her.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE WOMAN MADELON AGAIN.

‘Dire was his thought who first in poison steep’d
The weapon formed for slaughter.’

‘WOULD madame like some *riz au lait*?’ Madelon asks, civilly, with a cringing manner and tone that arouse astonishment in my aunt’s breast; not so in mine. Since our warm *tête-à-tête* in the kitchen, the woman has kept her promise of discretion most religiously, and there are no bounds to her amiability—only that, with the ignorance of a low mind, she often overdoes the part she has set herself to play.

My aunt lies on a sofa, prostrated by a nervous headache that makes her look doubly corpse-like. And I sit beside her, feeling woefully depressed, yet striving to amuse her to the best of my ability. Neither of us has done justice to the one o’clock dinner, and hence Madelon’s offer.

Riz au lait, though innocent, is one of her best dishes, and my aunt, with her simple taste, prefers it infinitely to the richer and more oleaginous compounds that the Count affected.

‘Thank you, Madelon—I should like some very much, if it is not too much trouble to you,’ she says, gratefully.

‘No trouble at all, madame,’ the woman answers obsequiously, and with a respectful curtsy she disappears. I sniff, expecting an odour of sulphur and brimstone to rise from the spot she has vacated. If the Count is Satan in disguise, assuredly Madelon is Hecate. My aunt, however, has none of these uncharitable thoughts, and she looks at me

and gives a placid smile. I suppose that in her feeble condition of health the very fact of not having to wrestle against insolence is a wonderful relief.

‘When do you think the Count will be back?’ I ask her.

‘Oh, Pearl, how can I tell?’ she says, sadly, with the ready tears rushing to her eyes. ‘I have not even heard from him since he left, all this long time. It is strange—very strange!’ she goes on, despondingly. ‘Can anything have happened to him, Pearl?’ she questions, excitedly.

‘No—what *could* happen?’ I reply, quietly, to try to calm her. ‘And if there was anything the matter, you would have heard it, aunt, for ill news flies apace, you know.’

‘Pearl,’ she whispers, in a low voice that I have to bend down to catch, ‘I dreamt about Jean last night.’

‘That was not strange—one often dreams of the object that occupies our waking thoughts.’

‘Yes, but it was a strange dream. I thought I was dying, choking, stifling, and when I put my two hands up to my throat, I found it was grasped hard—*hard*. The agony gave me strength to wrench myself away, and then I saw that it was Jean’s face that was bending over me—that it must have been *his* grasp that hurt me so.’

‘A foolish dream, aunt—a fit of indigestion, perhaps,’ I tell her reassuringly.

‘I don’t know how it could be indigestion,’ she says, innocently; and it *would* be strange if it were, for her meal yesterday was a meagre one—a thin slice of bread, with a scrape of butter. Since the Count took Jack’s last gift of twenty pounds, my aunt and I have been put on very scanty diet. ‘I wish Jean would come back,’ she sighs.

I cannot respond to her desire, so I say nothing, and for a little while we sit in silence in the dark, dreary room, through the narrow windows of which it is almost impossible to see heaven’s blessed light.

‘You look very pale, Pearl,’ she remarks at last, gazing at me fully. ‘This is a miserable life for you.’

‘I do not mind it.’ And when I think that I shall have to exchange it for the home in Liège or Brussels, for the home in which theatres and shell-fish are to have a share, I prefer the present, with its manifold drawbacks and anxieties.

I am at any rate free still—free to think without my thoughts being criminal. My guardian, for all I know, is yet unfettered, and so long as Bertrand is not my husband, nor Miss Græme my guardian's wife, the love that burns as hotly now as ever will not be crushed down, in spite of reason or pride. Let it live, until duty forces me to thrust it out along with every hope my heart has ever known.

'We will go back to Brussels when Jean comes—it will be better than being snow-bound here, won't it, Pearl?' my aunt interrupts my train of thought.

I assent, but the life in Brussels holds out no charms for me when I want to be leagues away in merry England, where in winter time the logs crackled in the red firelight, and soft Rembrandt shadows flitted hither and thither over the dear old room, and where *one* presence was enough to envelop me in a happiness that I shall never feel again.

'Madame, your *riz au lait*!'

I get up at once, and take the cup from Madelon's extended hand; and as I do so I cannot help noticing that her usually pale face is all patchy and mottled with red, while she looks as though she were labouring under the influence of some powerful emotion or excitement. She has been thinking again of the Count, her husband, the husband of both the women before me, who present the strangest contrast to one another.

'Madame should eat it while it is warm,' Madelon suggests, mildly and persuasively; but my aunt shakes her head. She has little appetite, and she is in no hurry to commence her repast, so I go on stirring the thick white mixture quietly; a curious bluish tinge rises to the surface as it grows colder, and I cease to stir.

'I think, aunt, that the milkwoman is rather liberal with water,' I remark, with a smile.

'The milk is very good, mademoiselle—far better than we get at Brussels,' Madelon puts in meekly.

I place my olfactory organ in close juxta-position to the bowl, but it emits no odour. Still I hesitate, arguing with myself that I am prejudiced, and that suspicion once aroused is like a watchdog's bark, it goes on for ever until the object suspected is out of sight. A conviction is in my mind that,

though *riz au lait* is supposed to be innocuous, Madelon's *riz au lait* is an exception to the rule.

I walk up to Madelon, who has retreated towards the door, and who keeps on turning red and pale alternately.

'Taste this ; it seems different from usual,' I order her peremptorily, and taking a large spoonful, I hold it towards her. She shrinks back.

'I never eat that sort of things, mademoiselle,' she says, in a trembling voice. 'I do not like them.'

'Never mind if you like them or not. You *must* taste this.'

She takes the bowl out of my hand, as if she were going to do as I request, and lets it fall, as if accidentally. Bibi, my aunt's dog, rushes out from under the sofa, where he has been curled up asleep, and before I can interfere, he laps up more than half.

'Leave the room,' I desire Madelon, and without a word of explanation or resistance, out she goes.

'How awkward of Madelon to upset that on the carpet,' my aunt remarks plaintively, deploring the spoliation of her threadbare drugget.

'Yes, it was very awkward of her,' I say, quietly, while I know that Madelon is not likely to stickle at any means by which she can put my aunt out of the world before the man she is jealous of returns. I dare not breathe a word of my suspicion, and, as the day crawls on, I sit outwardly undisturbed, but inwardly shuddering at the amount of sin and wickedness with which I am surrounded. I determine to manufacture my aunt's food myself for the remainder of our stay in the country, and resolve that, when we leave for Brussels, Madelon shall not form one of the party. Later on, as the evening shadows begin to fall, I leave the room to fetch a light, and Susanne pounces upon me in the long corridor that divides the house in two, as it were.

'Mademoiselle ! mademoiselle !' she cries.

'What is it ?' I ask, nervously ; my frame of mind just now is one in which I easily take alarm—even the banging of a door startles me, and makes my heart beat fast.

'What has happened ?'

'Look here !' and she points to a corner of the corridor. I approach with my candle, and see a fluffy white heap, with

four legs stretched out rigidly, a pair of big black eyes wide open, but glazed, a little tongue, spotted with froth, half hanging out. It is Bibi, poor little Bibi, stiff and stark dead. He has come to an untimely end, a victim to Madelon's *riz au lait*.

'Madame is ill, and this will make her worse,' good-hearted Susanne says, piteously.

'Yes,' is all I can trust myself to reply, and I go back sorrowfully to my aunt, and break to her the news that Bibi is dead, and she cries genuine bitter tears over the little Maltese. Bibi was only a dog, soulless, perhaps, but he must have had a heart, for he loved her, and sat at her feet and wagged his tail at her touch, and the big black eyes that are glazed over now wore for her a faithful look. Bibi was only a dog, but he had grown to be her familiar friend, her companion for many a year, in storm and in sunshine, in joy and in grief; and with his poor little life, valueless to others, she seemed to lose a portion of her own. I do not try to check her natural grief, or laugh at the drops that the death of a dog call forth; nay, I am foolish enough to cry myself, but when she grows calmer I get her comfortably into her bed and stoop to press my good-night kiss on her brow.

'You are a good girl, Pearl, and Heaven will bless you and make you happy,' she says to me softly; and I go away with her words curiously lingering on my ear. *Will* Heaven bless me and make me happy, I wonder? oh! will the dark shadow ever vanish and leave brightness behind—the brightness that encompassed me when *he* was by my side? He who is my life, my only love!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A NIGHT OF HORROR.

'Murder but intentional, not wrought
To horrid act, before the eternal throne
Stands forth the first of crimes.'

I CANNOT sleep; the wind howls and shrieks and roars, and seems to shake this tumble-down house to its foundation. I

sit up in my bed and listen to the elements in the dark, for a great gust has blown out the night-lamp. Presently, through the uproar of the storm, there reaches my ear what appears to me like a scuffling noise, and a long, low moan—then another one. I jump out hastily and creep slipperless to Susanne, who occupies the room as well, and I shake her gently.

‘Susanne, wake up! there is such a strange noise somewhere near!’

She just uncloses her eyelids and stretches her limbs.

‘*C’est un rat, mademoiselle,*’ she murmurs; and gently turning round on her pillow, she drops off again to sleep as sound as a top.

Again strange noises in the house reach me.

‘Susanne, some one moans!’ I whisper, tremulously, and I grasp her wrist hard to arouse her.

‘*C’est le vent!*’ she says, positively.

It is perfectly hopeless; she is very tired, poor soul! and slumber’s power is not to be shaken off.

I steal back on tiptoe to my own bed, and sit perched on the edge, shivering and listening intently. My aunt has the room that faces mine, and between us is a small ante-room, which is full of boxes and lumber.

Of a sudden I see the red glimmer of a light through the chinks of my door. It must be Madelon—it can be no one else; so, to see what she is doing in the middle of the night, I grope up to the door, and, kneeling by it, clutch tightly at the handle—for there is no lock. Holding my breath, I peer through the largest crack; but all I can discern is, what looks to me like a human arm moving hither and thither in the ante-room close to the ground, as if searching for something. Then there comes a very low whisper, and a wild curiosity gets the better of my horrible fear. Opening the door noiselessly the very least in the world, I peep cautiously out.

It is the Count come back! I recognise him at once, in spite of his disguise. A thick, dark scarf envelops his neck, and conceals the whole of the lower portion of his face; a skull-cap is drawn tightly down to his heavy, beetling brows, and his large black whiskers are shorn; but there is no mistaking the expression of his bold eyes, or the burliness of his figure.

It flashes across me all at once that, in this ante-room, inside an old broken deal case, the little wooden box containing our jewellery is hidden away, my aunt thinking that no one would dream of valuables amid the lumber. But Madelon or the Count must have suspected its whereabouts, for he has it tight in his right hand, and for the first time I see that hand without the grey glove. *The mark of a deep gash crosses it from side to side!*

Like lightning it comes to me that this man is no Count Delaville—that he is no other than my uncle, Jacques La Porte—bigamist, forger, thief, and the man whose blow killed my mother!

I shake all over, as if struck with palsy, as I look at him.

'*Viens! viens! Jacques, pour l'amour de Dieu!*' Madelon whispers, in a thick, hoarse, trembling voice, and my belief is confirmed. In another moment the light is extinguished and the couple gone.

I lean up heavily against the door in my agitation and it flies open, throwing me forward over the threshold, and I just save myself from falling over the lumber and rubbish which the fictitious Count has rummaged in his search for the jewels, and then left scattered all over the floor. A bunch of keys belonging to my aunt, a chisel and crowbar which I have seen in a drawer in the kitchen during the last week, repose together on a mass of straw, and I notice that my aunt's door is slightly ajar. I gather up all the strength I can muster, and crawl over the litter and reach her room. All is quiet and peaceful. The villain has at any rate had the mercy to leave her undisturbed.

Day has broken, and by the faint morning light I stand and look down on her as she lies on her bed, as white and as rigid as if she were dead. Her eyes are quite closed, her lips are compressed, her features stand out thin and peaked, with an expression of pain upon them. Noiselessly I turn from the bed, fearful of awakening her, when something touches my bare foot—something wet! Stooping down, I look—great Heavens! the sole of my foot is stained—*stained with a dull, deep hue!*

I utter no cry. Stumbling, I get back somehow to my room, and seizing Susanne with a hard grasp, I pull her right

out of bed, her brain all dazed with heavy sleep, her eyes only partially open, but I cannot speak, for my tongue seems paralysed, and my throat all dry and hot. Right through the ante-room, indifferent to impediments in our way, I drag her, never pausing until we stand side by side by my aunt's bed. *But on the other side of it.* Even in my mad excitement I have taken care to avoid *that* !

Still silent and trembling all over, I point with an unsteady finger to my aunt's figure and Susanne bends down to listen to the breathing, while she passes her hand across the pallid brow ; then, white as a sheet, drags down the coverlet to feel the heart. Oh ! my God, my aunt lies before us a ghastly sight to look on—

Her throat is cut from ear to ear.

CHAPTER XXXIV

A DAY OF HUMILIATION.

' Shame urges on behind, unpitied shame,
That worst of furies, whose fell aspect frights
Each tender feeling from the human breast.'

UNUTTERABLY sick and dizzy with fear and horror, my eyes grow dim and my limbs give way beneath me, when Susanne half leads, half carries me in her strong arms back to our common room, and puts me down passive and helpless on a chair near the window. This she throws wide open, in spite of the sharp wintry cold and snow ; and here I sit huddled up in a shawl, my teeth chattering, and feeling as though every atom of strength in my body had suddenly ebbed away. Susanne, meanwhile, with scared and pallid features, employs herself in placing my two portmanteaus against the door, and piling her own box, and all the small packages she can find, on the top of them, until a high barricade is formed. She is highly imbued with superstition, the gross and absurd superstition that appertains to the peasant class, and the mystery of death possesses something horrible for her. By

raising a visible and tangible barrier between us and *that* room, she really believes we are safer, though from *what* she does not in the least understand herself. When her work is accomplished, she comes back and seats herself on the floor at my feet.

'*Who* can have done this horrible thing, mademoiselle?' she whispers low, in her broadest *patois*.

I only shake my head in reply.

'It is awful you and I sitting here alone. It is a pity I did not awake Madelon to come and stay with us,' she goes on.

She gets no answer from me. It is better that she should remain in perfect ignorance of all I have seen; and besides this, my nerves are so unhinged that if I try to speak I know that I shall scream.

So we sit silent, Susanne and I, and across the little ante-room my aunt lies still and silent too, while the wretch whose murderous hand sent her into another world, lives, and is free to enjoy his cursed gain.

'Diamonds are indeed of the Devil's Kingdom!' when a precious human soul is bartered for greed of gold and glittering stones.

The house is one-storyed, as I said before, the bedrooms being on one side, the sitting-rooms on the other, with a corridor dividing them. In the small kitchen that juts out at one end Madelon slept. We are a mile from the station, by a lonely road which is bordered by high hedges, from which, unregarded, straggle out long branches of brambles across the path, and a few mean cottages, belonging to the poorest peasants, dot the way at far intervals.

When Susanne and I took our miserable stand at the window which gives out close to the ground, it was five o'clock and dark as pitch. No single sound has met our ears since but the puny twittering of some birds, as they seek warmth and shelter on the eaves.

It is seven now, and the pale, wintry sun is trying to emerge out of a bank of thick leaden clouds that overspread the sky. Suddenly a loud whistling of a popular Belgian air, accompanied by a brisk, light tread, breaks upon the silence. It is the curly-headed boy that brings us firewood two or three times a week.

Susanne jumps up quickly from her lowly seat, and leans far over the sill.

'*Bois de chauffage, madame?*' the *gamin* asks, in bright, cheerful tones, that I shrink painfully from, under the circumstances; and before Susanne has time to answer him, he deposits a large bundle of wood, roughly tied together, on the ground, and taking up shrilly an uncompleted passage in his tune, he walks off.

'Hish! hish!' Susanne calls, in a sharp, loud voice, and making a grimace at her, he begins to retrace his steps.

In her excessive agitation and excitement, Susanne succeeds in making a very incoherent explanation of the horror of the past night, but he does not wait long.

'*Au secours!*' he shrieks, at the top of his voice; and he takes to his heels as though a thousand fiends were behind dogging his steps.

In less than ten minutes half-a-dozen men and women stand by our window, with fear-stricken countenances, vociferously plying Susanne with questions regarding the event; then two men, braver than the rest, volunteer to survey the scene of horror, and walk round to the front entrance, which, of course, the *soi-disant* Count and his vile confederate have left open in their flight.

I sit where I am. I feel as if I *could not face* that awful sight again. The pain in those rigid features, the deep gaping gash on the poor lean throat, the red stain on the floor, will haunt me as long as I live; and I pray God fervently that my aunt died in ignorance of the hand that wrought the foul deed, for the knowledge that it was perpetrated by the hand of the man she adored in spite of infidelity and wrong, in spite of blows and stinging words, would have been far worse to her than death itself.

Filled with these thoughts, I forget to note the rapid flight of time, when Susanne rouses me with a cup of tea.

'Drink this, mademoiselle; it will do you good, and give you some strength,' she says; and I gulp it down, for my tongue is parched, and cleaves to the roof of my mouth. But the draught nauseates me; so, rising with a shiver, I go towards my bed. I have a desperate longing to creep under

the bed-clothes, in order that I may hide myself from everything and everyone.

It is a day of humiliation to me ; the shameful consciousness that I am of the same flesh and blood as *that* miscreant makes me recoil from all my species. For the first time I am thankful that my guardian and I are parted for ever. Miss Græme's affianced husband, wealthy, honourable, and respected can have nothing in common with me—a pauper, a bankrupt in affection, the daughter of a strolling actress, the niece of a wretched felon !

I shudder, and hide myself more vigilantly still when Susanne comes into the room, while the hot blood tingles in my face and curdles at my heart ; for I know that I am the lowest of the low—that even Susanne can boast of nobler and better birth than I can. 'The sins of the fathers shall be visited on the children.'

Am I suffering now because papa, in defiance of family affection and pride, against the desire of those to whom he owed obedience and respect, linked himself to Aimée La Porte, the sister of a vagabond and a thief, a felon and a murderer ? I ask my Creator again why, oh ! why was I born to such humiliation, to such degradation ? 'If I could only die !' I mutter to myself—'tis the refrain of my longing at La Roche—when a voice that I love well, a voice whose tones never leave my ear, bade me remember the words, 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'

'You must get up quickly and dress, mademoiselle—you are wanted.'

'Wanted ?—by whom ?' I cry, bitterly, but not in answer to Susanne so much as to a feeling which my heart realises at this moment that there is no one who wants me now—none to whom my welfare and my happiness are dear, save Bertrand, and he is nobody.

Susanne replies to my exclamation.

'By the sergents-de-ville and the civil authorities, who are all assembled in the room.' And she makes a gesture to denote *which* room.

'I cannot go, Susanne—I cannot indeed !' I say, passionately and determinedly, my face all blistered and stained with tears, my whole being battered by the storm of feeling I have

gone through, and with not as much courage as a child's within me. I feel that it will be an utter impossibility for me to stand the stare of rude eyes, the painful catechism from stranger lips.

'But you *must* go, mademoiselle—there is no help for it—they are waiting for you.'

She helps me up, and, smoothing my hair, throws a dark wrapper round me, and I walk, holding her arm tightly, into the room where the inquiry is to be held.

CHAPTER XXXV

MURDERED BY PERSON OR PERSONS UNKNOWN.

'All was ended now, the hope, the fear, and the sorrow,
All the outcry of heart, the restless, unsatisfied longing,
All the dull deep pain and constant anguish of patience.'

AN old man, with long silver hair and kind eyes, who I suppose is the Maire, occupies a prominent seat in the middle of the room, at the foot of the bed on which the outline of my aunt's figure is too plainly discernible under a large white cloth, which is thrown from head to foot. Around is a confused mass of uniform and black coats. My eyes seek the floor after one summary glance, and my pulse beats fast.

'Approach, mademoiselle.'

Susanne gently unlinks her arm from mine, and gives me a gentle push, and I take a few tottering steps forward. One of the men that stand around goes up to the bed and removes the white covering.

'Did you know the dead woman well?' the Maire asks, pointing with his finger.

I do not attempt to follow his gesture with a glance, but I answer in a very low voice,—

'Yes, she was my aunt.'

Was! The word strikes hard—hard! The thought comes to me that only yesterday she had life and strength, that only yesterday she kissed and blessed me, and I burst into a torrent of tears.

‘Calm yourself, mademoiselle,’ the old man says, soothingly.
‘Remember that death must come to us all.’

Yes! but death quiet and peaceful—death shorn of half its terrors by the presence of sorrowing faces and hearts, and dimmed eyes; not such a death as this—to be hurled into eternity by an assassin’s hand—to die like a dog, with the death-throes unwatched and uncared for!

‘Who were in the house besides you?’

‘Two servants.’

‘Were you on friendly terms with your aunt?’

‘I loved her, and she loved me,’ I reply, with an uncontrollable sob, that carries conviction of my sincerity, I suppose, for he seems to believe me.

‘Are you the only relation she had?’

‘No; she has a son living.’

‘Was he independent of her?’

‘Yes—he is very wealthy.’

‘Are you rich?’

‘No—I am very poor.’

‘Had your aunt any money?’—and, in spite of the benevolence of his features, I can detect a keen scrutiny of my countenance in them.

He thinks that cupidity may have led *me* to commit the crime!

‘Scarcely enough to live on.’

At this reply he brightens up, and benevolence unadulterated by suspicion shines out of his eyes.

‘Was she married?’

I hesitate. I have not been put on oath, as I expected, still I am supposed to speak the truth, and nothing but the truth. Madelon’s story—a story which I cannot help believing—comes to me, but I dare not risk a word that might reflect on the reputation and honour of the dead.

‘She told me she was,’ I say at last.

‘To whom?’

‘To Count Delaville.’

‘Where is he?’

‘I do not know.’

‘Were they on good terms?’

Again I pause before I answer. To be on good terms

both parties must be amicably inclined. I recollect only too well the Count's biting sarcasms, his bitter sneers, and his coarse and cruel treatment of my aunt, and truth urges me to a stout negative ; but *she* who is lying there wished that none should see the terrible skeleton in her closet, and so I say,—

‘She was very fond of him.’

‘That will do for the present, mademoiselle.’ And I fall back gladly.

‘Approach,’ he says, addressing Susanne.

Placed in a novel position in which for the first time in her life of some fifty years she finds herself the cynosure of a score of eyes, poor Susanne advances with her neck and cheeks as red as fire, and her large, sunburnt hands twisting awkwardly together.

‘Was the dead woman kind to you?’

‘Yes, your highness,’ she answers, humbly and obsequiously.

Aristocracy, on her brain, is a wonderfully confused mass of glittering grandeur, and Maires and Princes of the Royal blood all rank alike in her estimation.

I see a suppressed smile on the mouths of the men around her as she endows their superior with so magnificent a title.

‘Whom do you suspect of having murdered her?’

I lean forward to listen eagerly to her reply ; I have a strange curiosity to know if she suspects the right man.

‘I cannot think, your highness, unless it was her husband ; he is a very bad man,’ she blurts out, simply and frankly.

‘But her husband was not here.’

‘No more he was.’

‘Then how can he be the murderer?’

Susanne stares at him a moment open-mouthed with a puzzled expression on her broad face. To her mind logic is Greek.

‘That is certainly true,’ she says, very slowly, as if she had only just considered the Maire’s view of the case.

‘Where were you last night when the murder was committed? Now, speak the truth.’

‘Please your highness, I was sound asleep,’ she answers, with a shy look, as if ashamed that she had been caught in so commonplace an occupation.

‘You can go.’

And Susanne, thinking it but polite to recognise the honour he has done her in thus questioning her, drops him a low curtsey.

‘Call the other servant. Why was she not brought here before?’ the Maire asks, angrily.

The sergents-de-ville file off to make a strict survey of the premises both inside and out. In a few moments they return with ‘dead failure’ inscribed on their visages.

‘She is not here, Monsieur.’

‘Not here! Have you searched everywhere?’

‘Everywhere.’

The old man bites his lips hard, and reflects a while.

‘Approach, mademoiselle,’ he says to me; and reluctantly I go forward for another examination. ‘What is the missing servant’s name?’

‘Madelon.’

‘But her surname?’

‘I do not know;’ but the next instant I recollect that her surname must be La Porte.

‘Did this Madelon and the dead woman agree?’

‘No.’

The reply creates a sensation amongst the bystanders, uniting it with the fact of her flight. Suspicion naturally falls upon Madelon.

‘What was the cause of their not agreeing?’

‘Count Delaville was the cause.’

‘Ah!’ He does not think it necessary to pursue the question any further. ‘Did this Madelon ever show her dislike openly to the dead woman?’

I am just on the point of saying that she tried to poison her, but I recollect that I have no way of proving that even Bibi died by her hand.

‘She never hid her dislike.’

‘Do you believe in your own heart that the woman Madelon murdered your aunt? Now speak the truth rigidly, mademoiselle.’

‘No, I do not believe that she did,’ I answer, slowly and distinctly.

‘You can retire, mademoiselle.’

The inquiry is over, and the verdict is open—‘Murdered by person or persons unknown.’

I am back in my room ; the proof of my uncle's forgery is safe in my pocket ; the knowledge that his hand committed the foul murder is deep in my heart. In the cause of truth and righteousness, I ought to reveal all I heard and saw last night ; I ought to strain every nerve that the claims of justice may be satisfied ; but I cannot do it ; something seems to hold me back ; flesh and blood cry against it, and, as far as I am concerned, Jacques La Porte is safe.

A question and an answer in the park at Brussels recur to me ; the Count's dark face, with its sinister smile and bold, black eyes, seems to be looking into mine.

'If Jacques La Porte was at your mercy, you would not show him much, mademoiselle ?'

'I might, and I might not,' was my reply.

In spite of his cruelty to my mother, his wrongs to my father, my good angel triumphs over hatred and revenge, and I remember the words,—'Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord ; I will repay !'

CHAPTER XXXVI.

N E M E S I S.

'Oh that the slave had forty thousand lives ;
One is too poor, too weak for my revenge !'

'I would have him nine years a-killing.'

It is three days since the inquiry, and to-morrow they will carry my aunt away, to *bury her at the public expense*. The horror and humiliation kill me. The Cathcart pride sinks below zero, and shame dyes my face. Only a five-franc piece can be found amongst her possessions, not a trinket save her wedding-ring, which I cannot bear to have removed from the rigid finger on which it gleams, and I have nothing by which to gain the wherewithal, since my locket and bracelet are both gone. I have written to Jack, but no answer has reached

me ; he can never have received my letter, or he would have been here himself to pay the last tribute to the dead, who, in life, has been so cruelly wronged. Bertrand is travelling in Germany, and to my guardian I would die a dozen deaths of starvation sooner than apply in my sore, in my extreme distress. Miss Græme shall never know the depth to which I and mine have fallen, when my aunt will find a pauper's grave!

I pace like a caged beast restlessly up and down the narrow dining-room. A dingy mirror in a worn gilt frame hangs over the mantelshelf, and I pause deliberately before it. I want to examine my face. I am not vain, but I cannot help grieving just a little over the vanished bloom and freshness of my cheek. Two haggard eyes, weary, and with deep purple shades beneath them, stare back at me, and I fancy that there is a wrinkle puckering the corner of my mouth. I mechanically spout Shakespeare to comfort myself.

‘Beauty is but a vain and doubtful good,
A shining gloss, that fadeth suddenly ;
A flower that dies when first it ‘gins to bud ;
A brittle glass, that’s broken presently ;
A doubtful good, a gloss, a glass, a flower,
Lost, faded, broken, dead within an hour.’

But it is no use—philosophy at twenty is not deep, and I drink heavily of regret as I gaze at what I am and what I was. Two foolish tears ooze out of the two haggard eyes—emblems of woman’s vanity and woman’s vexation that three short days, days which terror and anxiety have lengthened into months, should have caused such havoc on my face. I have aged ten years since my aunt was murdered, both in appearance and in feeling. I sit down by the long rickety table that is covered by a fragment of red baize, which, in its battered condition, reminds me of the ‘flag that’s braved a thousand years the battle and the breeze.’ This baize has had many a conjugal battle fought over it, I’ll be sworn, if it could tell a tale—a battle in which the stronger vessel, though the most cowardly of the two, won its inglorious victory by dint of physical force. My elbows rest on the baize, and I dig my knuckles into my sockets so as to press back the tears that confuse my brain, tears that are not idle tears, but rise from a divine despair, as

the poet has it. I want my brain clear, so that I may in some way solve a difficult problem. How am I to live?

When I ask myself this question luxury is out of my thoughts, it is a pitfall I do not dream of stumbling into. I have fallen into a state of base materialism, and I am wondering how I shall get my bread and butter, or even bread by itself. For the last three days I have fed on charity—Susanne's charity! who has expended a portion of her scanty and carefully-hoarded store to provide for my young and healthy appetite. As I remember this, down goes my face on the baize, indifferent to dirt and greasy stains, and I weep like a child. A rumbling noise like that of a coach sounds on the road, and I raise my head to listen. It may be Jack!—Jack who will be my guardian angel, who will take on his broad shoulders all the worry that weighs down mine.

'Mademoiselle! mademoiselle!'

Susanne opens the door *sans cérémonie*, to come in, and pulls it nearly to again after her. Her tanned face owns a new radiance, and she wears a levity in her whole manner and deportment that shocks me, in this house of mourning and tribulation. I look at her reprovingly, and she understands.

'*Ah! je m'en souviens,*' she says, humbly; and in extenuation of her most ill-timed hilarity, she adds, '*Monsieur est ici!*'

'*Qui?*'

I almost shout, and then I gasp; an iron vice is pressing my heart so tightly that I can hardly breathe, and I blush furiously at my own folly, for 'Monsieur' must be Jack, of course.

'May I come in, Pearl?'

Through an aperture of four inches a pair of eyes are looking at me. I stand quite still, riveted to the floor. Calm and cold as a marble image, I do not even attempt to put out a hand to welcome him, for I know that my palm is not fit to touch the palm of my guardian. I, the pauper and the waif, homeless and friendless, a hanger-on to Susanne's charity. He, the wealthy, and of the best of England's blood.

'Why did *you* come here?' I say; and these few words, so rude, so ungracious, spoken in a hard, strange tone, are all that I give him. He who is my life, and at whose feet I have laid my soul.

'Oh! my child, do not greet me like this!'

His eyes gaze sadly at my wan face and heavy eyes. I feel that beauty is not a vain and doubtful good, and that I would I had more of it. His voice trembles as he speaks, but I turn away and try to be deaf to it. If he knew everything he would not address me, or let his glance seek mine. Suddenly I resolve that I will put him to the test, no matter what misery I may reap by my rashness.

'Do not attempt to speak to me, do not look at me, Mr Haviland, until you know all.'

It never, of course, enters his head that the 'all' savours of disgrace, of the degradation to which I am reduced—perhaps he fancies that the recent dreadful event has turned my brain to some extent.

'You shall tell me all by-and-by! Now I only want to hear if you are glad to see me, Pearl!'

And Sir Galahad's tawny moustache sweeps lightly over my brow, so lightly that I cannot tell if his lips touch my hair. He clasps my hands firmly, and forces me to turn my face towards him, whether I will or not.

'Are you glad to see me, little one?'

I evade a reply. I feel that I must tell him everything before I can set free the mad happiness that comes over me at being near him once again.

'Mr Haviland, will you swear that you will never breathe to living ears what I am going to tell you?' I ask, looking at him with solemn eyes, and speaking gravely and distinctly.

'Yes.'

This is all the answer he makes, but it is quite sufficient to satisfy me, for I would believe his simple 'yes' before all the florid oaths of any other man. My mode of confession must of necessity be brief and abrupt, although I startle him.

'I am low, base-born! My mother was a strolling actress; my aunt had no right to the name of the man with whom she lived; my uncle is a bigamist and a forger, a thief and a murderer! Can you speak to me, look at me, after *this*, Mr Haviland?' I cry out passionately, the words drops of bitterness straight from my heart.

'Pearl!'

Only just my name, but uttered in a tone that is enough

and the blue eyes speak the rest. In another instant my throbbing forehead is pillowed on his arm, and my heart, that swelled so high with shame and bitterness, grows calm and almost happy.

‘Did you not trust in me, Pearl?—do you not *know* that *nothing* could keep me from you?’ he asks, reproachfully.

I do not remove my face from its resting-place to answer him. I feel as if I wanted peace and rest so much, and this is peace and rest infinite. We have not met for so many months, the months that have been so fearfully eventful to me, that just for a little while we forget that anyone exists but our two selves. Sir Galahad’s arm moves gently from under my head, but only to clasp my waist, and his mouth is pressed to my forehead.

‘It is only a guardian’s kiss, Pearl,’ he murmurs, deprecatingly, with a flushed face and kindling eyes. ‘Even Bertrand de Volnay would forgive it.’

I cannot tell if he would, and I do not take much heed whether he would or not. I have never hidden from Bertrand that I have no affection to give him, and if he is determined to take the casket without the contents, it is his fault, and not mine. Of course I know that Mrs Grundy would be shocked that I, the betrothed of Bertrand de Volnay, should allow another man’s lips to approach my face. But Mrs Grundy does not know—*no one* can know what this kiss is to me, the unspeakable happiness, the supreme content that it brings to me in its touch.

My guardian and I sit down side by side on the little horse-hair sofa with its tattered covering, and I tell him all that has happened, concealing nothing, and feeling very hot about the cheeks when I say hesitatingly, and in a hushed voice,—

‘And there is no money in the house to pay for taking away my aunt to-morrow.’

He understands at once—understands without letting me suffer the humiliation of an explanation.

‘My poor child!’ he says, pityingly, caressing my hair softly, ‘I ought never to have allowed you to come here at all—I ought not to have let you out of my sight.’

I move up just a little closer to him, and pass a finger lightly over his sleeve. The knowledge that he is near—that

I can touch him—has an exquisite pleasure for me that I cannot resist.

‘Tell me, Pearl—were you at all sorry to leave Glenthorn?’

‘I was wretched!’ I exclaim, bluntly; and I dash away a big tear that springs up in my eyes.

‘Were you? Yet your little regret was nothing to my agony of feeling in losing *you*, Pearl!’

I cannot believe this, for it would have been impossible for him to regret me more than I did him; but it makes me happy to hear him say it. Then a thought which has embittered my life for months, but which, in the surprise and joy of seeing him, has passed away for a while, suddenly recurs to me.

‘Is the wedding at Glenthorn over?’ I ask, in fear and dread, with a little unsteadiness in my voice.

‘Yes—it took place last week. Did not my mother write and tell you?’

‘No—she has not written to me for a long time,’ I reply, sorrowfully.

‘But she has, Pearl. Possibly the letters have miscarried.’

‘And so the wedding took place last week?’

‘Yes—and luckily it was so, for I had no difficulty in getting off to you directly the telegram in the papers about what had occurred here met my eye. Not but that I should have come all the same, if a dozen weddings had been in the way.’

‘A dozen weddings would not be so important in your eyes as this one.’

‘Well, I don’t know; weddings are not very interesting things as a rule, and this one was more a union of hands than of hearts.’

I look at him in amazement. How strangely he speaks for a bridegroom!

‘And did not she mind your coming here?’ I ask, knowing that, if I were in the bride’s place, I should strongly object to his leaving me.

‘Who?—Mimi?’

‘Of course.’

‘No. Why should she? She is quite happy and contented now that she has got a long purse and a fine house, and she has no time to think about me,’ he laughs.

'How strange!' I murmur to myself; but he hears me.

'Strange?—why? Mimi and I are fond of one another as cousins—*voilà tout*,' he asserts, with marvellous indifference.

This is a phase of early married life which I have never pictured.

'Then did she marry only for interest?'

'Mimi is more worldly-minded than you are, Pearl; she would have thought it folly to refuse a good match just because love did not have much share in the matter. It was the best marriage she could make. She has secured all the good things of this life, and she has the advantage of my mother's advice and experience always at hand. The *love* will come by-and-by, I hope and believe.'

I shrink away a little distance from him—the last part of his sentence gives me a jealous pang.

'Don't go away so far from me,' he pleads. 'Remember how very long it is since we sat together!'

But my heart gets obdurate, and my temper rises.

'You have no right to come here—you have no right to sit near *me*; you had better go back to—Mimi!' I flash out angrily; and I only utter her Christian name because I cannot bring my lips to form the words 'your wife.'

He catches hold of my hand and draws me nearer.

'And what would Talbot say to that, I wonder?' he replies, with one of his smiles. 'And oh! I forgot all about this, with which Mimi sent her love;' and he pulls out a large glazed envelope, edged with silver cupids playing hide-and-seek amongst orange blossoms. As I examine the device a card drops on to my lap. I take it up wonderingly, and 'Mr and Mrs Reginald Talbot' meets my eye.

Shame of my doubts of my guardian, and a rush of the deepest joy at finding myself mistaken, make me bury my burning face on the tattered old sofa cushion.

'Not *there*, Pearl!'

The next minute, in spite of Bertrand and duty, my face is hidden on his breast.

'Did you believe that *I* was the bridegroom, Pearl?'

I give the slightest pressure in the world to the hand that holds mine, in order to notify an affirmative.

'Listen, Pearl. While you are free, I shall never fetter

myself to any other woman ; and when you are out of my reach, I shall be wedded to the past in which *you* have lived. Never doubt me again, child !'

Oh ! I love him—love his voice, his eyes, his kisses. My world is within the reach of my yearning arms, yet duty bids them be still beside me, and maidenly decorum enchains my tongue.

'Have you seen Bertrand de Volnay ?' he asks me, in a tone in which I can detect the faintest touch of anxiety.

'Yes.'

'And did you grow to care for him more ?'

'No.'

'Laconics, Pearl ! Since when have you learnt to be reserved and uncommunicative to me ?' he says, reproachfully.

'What answer could I give your questions more satisfactory than yes and no ? And I hate to speak on the subject !' I cry, petulantly.

'Forgive me for alluding to it, then,' in a hurt and formal voice that stabs me.

'I am not reserved to you, and you know it ! I hate to speak on the subject of Bertrand, because it brings before me so vividly the miserable life in store for me. Oh, Mr Haviland, have pity on me, and instead of reminding me of my fate, help me to forget it, if you can !' I beg of him piteously.

He clasps me in his arms—the arms that would fain shield me from all that is evil.

'And I am powerless to save you, little one—I who would give my life to secure your happiness.'

'I *feel* happy now,' I say, very softly.

My head lies on his shoulder, and his stalwart arms encircle me like a wall of protection, and a silence falls upon us. Eloquence is not wanted—it is enough for us that we are together once more. I close my eyes, to try to shut out the image of Bertrand, and to realise more fully the actual presence of my guardian, when the door is violently pushed wide open, and I start out of my beautiful day-dream. It is the woman *Madelon* who stands before me !

'Mademoiselle, I have come back,' she tells me, in a coarse, loud voice.

'So I see.'

She looks like a mad woman ; her hair hangs wildly down her back ; her eyes glare, and her whole demeanour is so strange and excited that I shrink away from her with alarm close to my guardian, and he throws his arm around me. The woman flashes a look of curiosity at us. Then she bursts into a harsh, hoarse laugh.

‘Lovers, I see! Have nothing to do with love! Mademoiselle, I tell you that *it kills both body and soul!* I loved Jacques La Porte, loved him through thick and thin! I would have worked my fingers to the bone to help him! I would have sold my soul to the devil to do his bidding, and without one murmur of discontent! When he told me he was going to entrap *La Vieille*—’

The disrespect to the dead that lies in the adjoining room hurts me.

‘Madelon, hush!—my aunt lies there!’ I say, gravely.

She looks awed, and pales a shade as I speak ; then, glancing towards the room, she crosses herself devoutly ; but her hardness and volubility soon return, and she takes up the thread of her discourse just where it was broken.

‘Into a sham marriage. I let him do it, for he told me that she was rich, and that her money would benefit him, and that he could not love such as *her*, for he knew that I was jealous of him—jealous like all women to whom the one man is everything in the world! I helped him to get more gold, for Jacques was fond of gold—it was dearer to him than the salvation of his soul!—and to gain it he would sacrifice anything. Then at last nothing would suffice him but *La Vieille’s* life, because he was afraid that she would be wrought over by you, mademoiselle, to stand forward as a witness to the forgery he committed on her son ; and so, in obedience to him, *I held the candle while he cut her throat!*’

Horror-struck at this terrible specimen of womanhood before me, I involuntarily cling closer to Sir Galahad. Madelon notices the gesture, and laughs again, even more hoarsely and freely than before.

‘Have a care, mademoiselle!—take warning by me! You see what love has brought me to! And I was as young and as innocent as you once—ay, and quite as pretty too!’

Pretty! Even the shadow of good looks has deserted her

face, and on every feature of it malignancy and hatred are rife ; and united to this, Madelon has been drinking, not enough, perhaps, to render her stupid, but sufficient to fire her brain, and make her figure sway as she stands here, a fearful Nemesis ! In a moment or two she goes on.

‘ When the deed was done, *La Vieille’s* tongue silenced for ever, and the jewels safely deposited in the valise, Jacques and I set off from here. He was well disguised, and none of the peasantry about were likely to recognise me in a cloak and bonnet belonging to madame. So we tramped on side by side safely, and without fear of molestation, for many a league. At last, thoroughly worn out, I prayed him to let me have just one hour’s rest.

“ Come behind this clump of trees, and I will find a seat for you,” he said, kindly. I followed, when suddenly the *very same knife that had cut La Vieille’s throat (the blade was still stained with her blood)* flashed close to mine. Holding me tight, he cried, “ Now, then, Madelon, my good woman, for you ! I am not such a fool as to let *you* live. You know too much ! ”

‘ But he forgot that I was not *La Vieille*, that my strength was almost equal to his own ! I caught the knife quickly out of his hand, and stuck it with all my force into his cowardly arm—the arm that had caressed me many a time, but which now would have robbed me of life as coolly as if I had been a sheep. Weak with loss of blood, he sank upon the ground, and there I left him. He cannot go so far but that *I* shall find him again !

‘ I lay for twelve hours in a cabaret, drunk, mademoiselle, dead drunk—wine was the only thing that kept me from going mad ! When I grew sober I recollected I had a heavy debt to pay Jacques La Porte. I have come back for the sake of vengeance, mademoiselle—vengeance on the base, ungrateful, villain !—to ask you to go with me to the Mairie, with the proof of his forgery in your hand, while my tongue shall denounce Jacques La Porte as the murderer of *La Vieille* ! Oh ! mademoiselle, make haste, or the police may lose his track ! ’

I look at her in aversion and disgust ! Can it be possible that love, even of the lowest order, should ever turn to such

fiendish feeling as that which fills this woman's breast?—a feeling that has unsexed her? Two blazing red spots inflame her cheeks, and her veins stand out in knotty chords on her temples. The greed of vengeance is awfully, terribly strong within her; it has swallowed up all her past, and sent her adrift in the present with a wild beast's craving for human blood!

'If she should do as she threatens, will the authorities not punish her as an accomplice?' I whisper to my guardian.

It appears to me almost a sin that such a creature should be let scot-free on the earth.

'She has turned what I fancy they call Queen's evidence, and in England she would not be touched; but I do not know the law here,' he replies.

I put my hand covertly into my pocket and draw out the envelope that contains the forged signatures, and I slip it quietly into Sir Galahad's palm.

'Madelon, *you* can denounce Jacques La Porte for murder if you will, but the proof of his guilt as a forger is no longer in my possession.'

She turns upon me wrathfully, with kindling eyes.

'Aha! mademoiselle, blood is thicker than water, I suppose, and it would not be pleasant to you to see your uncle hanging on a gibbet, and his body devoured by dogs!' she sneers.

I feel sick and faint, and I reel as I stand. Sir Galahad puts me on the sofa, and taking the woman by the shoulders he turns her forcibly out of the house and double locks the door.

'I shall never look up again—never!' I moan, bitterly, crushed down by a mighty shame, when he is back again kneeling before me, and kissing my hands into warmth.

'Yes, you will, Pearl—begin by looking up at me,' he whispers lovingly.

I do, and the look brings back the colour to my cheek and hope and strength to my heart.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

TEARS—IDLE TEARS.

‘Tears are the safety-valves of the heart when too much pressure is laid on.’

‘THIS will never do, Pearl!—you must really try to rouse yourself!’ And Mrs Haviland accompanies her words by an affectionate pat on my shoulder, and a pinch to my cheek, by which she hopes to produce an impromptu pink. But the roses are faded, and will not bloom again at her bidding.

I exert myself to smile in order to please her, but I feel myself that it is a very puny attempt at cheerfulness.

‘It is true, poor child, that you have had quite enough to try your nerves, even if they were of iron,’ she adds; but she never guesses *how much*.

My guardian and I keep my dreadful family secrets between us, and he guards them even more vigilantly than I do; for since he has known of them, his kindness and consideration are redoubled, and he treats me as though I were an imperial guest at Glenthorn, instead of what I am—a miserable hanger-on to his bounty. When I remember this fact, I almost bring myself to regret that I was rash enough to refuse Bertrand’s proposition of immediate marriage. I should only have forestalled unhappiness by a short time, for this is February, and in three months I shall no longer be a dependent on Sir Galahad. Billets de banques, shell-fish, theatres and drives in the Bois—what more can ordinary human nature require than these to make of life a terrestrial paradise? But my nature is not ordinary, I suppose. I have a nature, like the hungry boy in the tale, who always craved for the things he could not get, and, in spite of his hunger, preferred starving under his adverse lot. Oh, supreme mockery of marriage! when hands and lives are linked together, and hearts are so wide apart—a marriage of the day—that means the sensual fancies of nerveless boys, and the sickly wish of girls for whom society can find no other employment; and when I reflect that it is this kind of arrangement that is to crown my existence, I grieve no longer that yet, for a little

while, I eat the crumbs that fall from my guardian's hand, and think them far preferable to the stalled ox and strife which will grace the board of De Volnay.

Jacques La Porte has escaped human vengeance, after all. Three days after Madelon had left him on the ground faint from loss of blood, leagues away from any habitation, and without the means of procuring food, a man, answering to the description she gave of him to the police, was found stiff and stark, frozen to death, with his head lying downward in a ditch to which he had crawled for water ; but the jewels he was supposed to have in his possession were not discovered, and their fate remains a mystery.

'It is a quick retribution,' Mrs Haviland remarks as she reads the account.

'After nineteen years !' I murmur sadly to myself, as I remember the fate of my mother. But to my guardian I am not reticent.

'Another respectable addition to my family annals, when my uncle dies in a ditch like a dog !' I cry, bitterly.

He looks at me with a world of sympathy in his glance, and I suppose the sight of my poor white passion-tossed features and tear-stained cheeks, my heaving chest and sobbing lips, touches him.

'Love ! love ! if I had but the right to comfort you—if I might take you into my strong arms and rest your weary little face on my heart !' he says, passionately.

I give him a wistful look, but I answer nothing ; only when I go out of his presence these very words of his make my burden seem doubly hard to bear.

'Pearl is no more Pearl,' Mrs Haviland complains to her son. 'We miss her merry laugh, her bright little smile, don't we, Robert ?'

He assents with an attempt at a smile that is only a ghost like mine.

'My vocation is to be miserable ! for in the language of gems, pearls signify tears,' I tell her, but she shakes her head dubiously.

'Robert, Pearl must have change ; she has grown so slight that a puff of wind could blow her away from us ! Look at her wrist,' and she bares my arm up to the elbow, and holds it

up for his scrutiny. It is thin and brown, but his eyes linger upon it, as though it were as snowy and plump as Miss Græme's. 'And then she is so white that I can hardly believe she is flesh and blood, but only a sprite come to visit us for a little while. She shall go at once for change of air to Blechington.'

I stare at her perfectly aghast. Before this new prospect I almost lose sight of past troubles. Blechington is about six miles from Glenthorn, and Mrs Reginald Talbot reigns there as *suzeraine*.

'Oh no, no!' I cry, energetically, with all my languor forgotten. The very idea of having to guard my secrets under a calm exterior before the hazel eyes of my old foe fills me with inexpressible dismay. 'Let me stay here quietly, please, dear Mrs Haviland; no place could make me so happy as Glenthorn,' I beg of her piteously.

She looks pleased at this sentiment, for she loves Glenthorn too, every stick and stone of which are to her familiar friends; but she is evidently not convinced that I am capable of knowing what is best for my physical welfare.

'Well, then, where can you go, if you do not care for Blechington?' she asks, having come to the conclusion that my distaste is for that particular spot.

'Nowhere! *Don't* send me away!' I implore.

Then, not content with this, I turn to my guardian, who sits close by listening to, but not joining in, the conversation.

'You will persuade your mother to let me stay here?' She never refuses you anything.'

He rises from his chair and goes up to her.

'Mother, in three months more we shall lose Pearl for ever; until then let her remain here,' he says, in a low, broken voice, with quivering lips and moist eyes; and then he leaves the room.

Mrs Haviland's glance follows his receding figure with astonishment and anxiety shining in it; then she heaves a deep sigh—a sigh that evokes a responsive one in my breast.

'I never saw him look, or heard him speak, like that in his life before,' she murmurs audibly, to herself. 'Can he by any chance—'

She stops short, and a flush crosses her face, as though a new light had broken in upon her. She is the simplest and

most unreserved of God's creatures, and she naturally lets fall the thoughts that are in her mind.

'Pearl, I really think that you ought to tell me a little about yourself; we have known each other for so long now, and yet I seem very much in the dark about you and your plans for the future. You have no mother, dear child, and I had hoped that you would have learned long ere this to look upon me in the light of one.'

'And so I do!' I exclaim. 'No mother could be kinder to me than you have been. I would tell you anything in the world!'

'Commence at once, then.'

'Do you mean about my marriage?' I ask, in low, husky accents.

It is a subject that always drags me down below zero, and makes my tones keep pace with my spirits.

'Yes.'

'It will be in May,' I manage to get out; but I cannot prevent the misery I feel cropping out as well.

She is perhaps a little obtuse at times, but the doleful expression of my face is unmistakable.

'Is this Monsieur de Volnay nice?'

'Yes,' I reply, though ignorant of what constitutes the word 'nice' in her estimation. Bertrand is neither intellectual nor especially refined—qualities that she evidently admires, as she has fostered their growth in her son; but he is assuredly simple and honest—two virtues which may satisfy the million, if the million be less *exigeant* than myself.

'Is he good-looking?'

This is the last question that I should have imagined her asking, at her age women do not trouble much about appearance. Mature judgment pronounces, as a rule, that handsome is as handsome does; but I see that she is putting me through my paces, to arrive, by the tone of my replies, at my true standard of Bertrand.

'Good-looking?—to some people's taste, perhaps. I hate dark men.'

Mrs Haviland's still red lips screw themselves up into two little rosebuds, with an intelligent smile upon them. But if in her heart of hearts she suspects me of any undue partiality

for a fair man, she has the delicacy to keep her suspicions to herself.

‘Tell me, Pearl, does this Monsieur de Volnay *love* you?’ she says, with pointed emphasis on the word ‘*love*.’

‘I suppose so, or he would not wish to marry me,’ I reply, indifferently.

‘*Suppose* so! Oh, my dear Pearl, and do you not care to find out if he does? Is marriage so trivial a thing that you do not stop to weigh every feeling before you venture on the irrevocable step? Pearl, do you utterly forget that, once you are Monsieur de Volnay’s wife, you bind yourself for ever?—that not only every feeling, but every thought, will belong wholly and solely to your husband?’

‘I know.’

‘And are you ready to yield up your heart, with its every feeling and thought, into Monsieur de Volnay’s keeping? Can you go to the altar bravely and honestly, and swear, with pure, true lips, to hold to him, and him only?’

No need for any answer but the tears—idle tears—hot, bitter tears, that well up fast, and then flow slowly down my face.

‘Pearl, are you going to perjure yourself?’

Still I am silent, for I know not what to say. Mrs Haviland pauses a moment, eyeing me gravely. Then she gets up, and comes to me, and puts her arms round my neck, holding me to her, as if her frail strength could keep me out of Bertrand’s grasp.

‘My poor little Pearl!’ she says, softly—‘surely this sacrifice of a life need not be completed! Can nothing be done by Robert to prevent this marriage? He is your guardian, and he has a right to interfere, you know.’

‘No one living has a right to interfere between this marriage and me, for it was willed by the dead!’ I answer, hopelessly.

‘And does Robert take the same view of the case as you do? Does he believe that duty calls upon you to marry a man you do not love?’

‘Mr Haviland knows that papa’s last act was to put my hand into Bertrand’s. I cannot take away that hand, even if I am unable to give my heart with it.’

‘Then Robert is aware that this marriage *must* be—that there is no help for it?’

‘Yes,’ I whisper, through a torrent of scalding tears.

‘My poor Robert!’ Mrs Haviland says, pitifully; and her tears fall to keep mine company.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A SACCHARINE MORSEL.

‘Spite is a little word, but it represents as strange a jumble of feelings and compound of discords as any polysyllable in the language.’

THE eastern proverb, that when the mountain would not come to Mahomet, Mahomet was forced to go to the mountain, is in a manner illustrative of my relations with Blechington, though Mrs Talbot would personify the mountain better than I do.

‘It was Mimi’s suggestion that you should go and stay with her for a while, Pearl,’ Mrs Haviland tells me; and as the suggestion was not carried out, Mrs Talbot has come here in order to satisfy herself (she being ineligible now for the position) whether I am likely to be raised to the pinnacle she coveted, that of mistress of Glenthorn.

A magnificent mansion, numerous retainers, a lengthy purse and excellent dinners, have all aided to impart an amplitude to her form, but the little feline propensity that was remarkable in her before her marriage still holds its own. She purrs over me, and at the same time puts out velvety claws that are more irritating than soothing, and her attacks are made in an amiable tone that renders one defenceless under them, although they leave a raw wound in the mind long after they are inflicted. She is Miss Græme still in nature, though she has changed her name. Matrimony has not softened down her asperity. ‘Age does not wither her, nor custom stale her infinite variety’ of saying unpleasant things. But I take the words of a wise old man, ‘If thou

intendest to vanquish the greatest, the most abominable, and wickedest enemy, who is able to do thee mischief both in body and soul, and against whom thou preparest all sorts of weapons, but cannot overcome, then know that there is a sweet and loving physical herb to serve thee named Patientia.' And sitting calmly as on a monument, I smile at my enemy.

'How fearfully ill you look, Pearl! Gracious! what have you been doing to make yourself so plain?' This is her salutation.

I feel wonderfully small and insignificant by the side of her bulky figure, as the faithful mirror that hangs opposite reflects us both. I see that she is fair, and plump, and saccharine, while I am her antipodes, dark, thin, and discontented. For a little while human nature is in revolt against the caprice of fortune; then my glance falls on Mrs Talbot's husband, and I am myself again, with my ruffled serenity restored. The whey-faced puppy, as Jack designated him in the soreness of wounded vanity and rabid jealousy, appears to have collapsed since last I saw him into half his normal size, and he bears a brow-beaten and peevish expression on his face, as though his monster lump of sugar had first nauseated him and then crushed him into a mere nothing—a miserable nought in the world! In a word, Mr Reginald Talbot is hen-pecked, and Xantippe's shrewish tongue never wielded so absolute a sway as Mrs Talbot's sweet tones exercise on her bridegroom of a few months.

'And what avails,' I say to myself, 'the marvellous beauty of this woman, the dazzling purity of her skin, the golden tint of her hair, if by their aid she could only reach this meek and mild specimen of humanity?' I cease to envy her.

'Reggy, I thought you knew Miss Cathcart?' she says, sharply.

'Yes,' he answers, in the feeble falsetto that I remember so well, and which sounds more like the chirp of a fledgling than the voice of a man; and he tries all the while to ward off the snips and snarls of Sir Galahad's dogs from his lower limbs.

'Well, why don't you come and speak to her, then?'

'I will when these brutes let me! I wonder how Haviland can allow such ferocious beasts to be at large?' And I see

him surreptitiously, but adroitly, administer a sharp kick at Dolly's nose with the heel of his boot.

This settles my opinion of him still lower in the scale than it was. Men who can wage war with, or conquer in unequal combat, women and dumb creatures, are nothing but cowards and bullies, and ought to be ousted from society. When he comes up to me I surrender coldly the tips of two of my fingers to him.

'Is not Pearl awfully altered, Reggy? Looks twenty years older, poor thing!'

'She *does* look older, poor thing!' he replies, like an echo, and as if he had been tutored to assent to his larger half's assertions.

The dual information may be strictly veracious, but it is in nowise flattering, and leaves me again in a morbid condition of discontent with the physiognomy that Providence has bestowed. But it is far more mortifying to me when my guardian comes in.

'Oh! Robert, Reggy and I are so shocked at Pearl's appearance!'

'Is she ill?' he cries, turning hurriedly for a survey of my countenance.

I laugh, to re-assure him.

'Not ill, but changed so dreadfully—she looks like her own grandmother! I should hardly have recognised her.'

'I think *I* should have known her anywhere,' Sir Galahad answers with a smile; but it is very wounding to my *amour propre* to have all my deficiencies and shortcomings dragged into notice for his especial benefit, and I colour up a bright crimson.

'“And red as a rose is she,” at the remarkable tenacity of your memory,' Mrs Talbot says, meaningly.

'Well, Pearl, and how did you enjoy yourself abroad?' she goes on heedlessly.

The red in my face gives way to white. My sojourn abroad is too fresh in my memory, too harrowing in its recollections, for me to speak callously of it.

'Mimi, you forget,' remonstrates my guardian, gently.

But Mimi is a full-blown matron now, the owner of broad

acres, and in a position to wound feelings in cold blood, if it so pleases her.

'Pearl, you *must* tell me all about the murder. How delightfully exciting the whole affair must have been!'

'I cared for my aunt,' I tell her gravely, in the hope of checking her levity on such a subject; but my words are as light as air, and do not touch her a feather's weight.

'Did you? Poor creature! What a terrible man that uncle of yours must have been!'

I start as if I had been shot, but the next moment I rally, as I recollect that she must mean my aunt's husband. Thank God my relationship with Jacques La Porte is a sealed book to this chattering magpie!

'The Count *was* a terrible man!' I reply, feelingly; and I cannot help glancing at Sir Galahad, to mark if Mrs Talbot's allusion to and condemnation of my uncle has lessened me in his estimation. Not a bit of it. He is scowling at her as much as his broad, wide forehead, smooth as ivory, can scowl. He is indignant *for* me, and not *at* me.

'I think Burgundy and roast chicken would be preferable to these reminiscences. What do you say, Talbot?'

Reggy, the effeminate, brightens up, and ceases staring at Dolly's long white teeth, which she has displayed ever since his foot and her nose came in contact. Sir Galahad offers his cousin his arm.

'No, thanks, I never lunch,' I tell Mr Talbot; and as the three go out of one door, I step on the lawn by another, and am soon lost to view in the grounds.

I wander on till I come to a favourite spot—a rustic bench spreads its arms invitingly, and I fling myself into them and look around. It is only the fitful month of April—the month of smiles and tears, but the sun shines down in full meridian ardour and sears the blades of the long grass, and sends his beams through the thick tree-tops and across the indolent ripple of water. In the foliage scarce a twig stirs above. The west wind, albeit balmy with fragrance, comes both faint and slow in gentle whispers, that sound like magic melody. Beneath the bright heavens odours like incense to the God of light go up from tangled heaps of blossoms, and shadow is nowhere, from the yellow-lighted tree-tops down to the green

turf at my feet, which daisies and cowslips enamel in white and gold.

With dreamy eyes, half closed, I watch the birds overhead, and the pale yellow butterflies skimming over the blades of the grass. Away to the right the house gleams through a belt of chestnuts, overtopped by the stately pines ; and to the left stretches a broad expanse of heather, gemmed with the red of flaunting poppies.

A fair domain truly, a huge bower of Eden, but I want none of it save its Adam. Desert and hovel, palace and cot, would be all alike, so long as I rested in the sunlight of his smile, or even in the shadow of his frown ; he yet was mine, my very own, mine 'to have and to hold, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, until death do us part.'

The sun has gone down, and the soft west wind has grown chilly, when I walk slowly back to the house ; and I am glad that the visitors are gone. My guardian meets me in the hall and hangs up my garden-hat.

'How ruffled your hair is, Pearl ? What have you been doing ?' and he smooths my untidy curls caressingly.

'Lying on the bench near the hazel copse, while rude Boreas dallied with my locks, I suppose.'

'Boreas did not confine his attention to your hair, he has wooed your cheeks into a bright bloom, and deepened the light in your eyes as well. How lovely you look, Pearl !'

I think that he is trying to make up to me by these soft speeches for Mrs Talbot's animadversions on my appearance, and I glance up at him gratefully, but the glow on his own face, the fervour I can read in his gaze, convince me that he really is a victim of self-delusion, and my heart flutters like a bird in my breast as I realise his admiration.

'But I begin to look so worn, so old !' I sigh, for I *want* to be young and beautiful that I may please *him*, to gratify his taste.

'If you are beginning to look old, what must I be doing ? See how the grey hairs have multiplied since the last walk we took together before you went away to Belgium. It was your absence that fostered them into increasing. Suppose Pearl, you were a free agent, could you ever make up your mind to marry so old a man ?'

I look at him to see if he is joking—but no, he awaits my decision with positive anxiety depicted on his features.

‘Oh!’ I cry impatiently, ‘you torture me! I hate the very sound of marriage and giving in marriage,’ and I break from his clasp and run upstairs, angry that he should bring little vivid bits of paradise before me, just for mere talk’s sake. Yet when I go down into the drawing-room before dinner, and find him all alone, lying on the sofa, with a shadow on his face, my heart relents and softens, and, stealing up behind him, I whisper over his shoulder,—

‘You know what I meant by what I said in the hall?’

‘No, indeed, I have not an idea, Pearl,’ he replies, sadly.

‘Surely you can guess?’ my lips almost touch his ear, and a long refractory curl that has an antipathy to being kept in its proper place obtrusively brushes his cheek into a flush.

‘Pearl, if I guess rightly *will you kiss me?*’ he says, in a low, little voice, as if he was wrong in making such a request. I know as well as he does that he is wrong, but, nevertheless, weak woman’s nature gives way under the temptation. I have never kissed him in my life before.

‘Yes,’ I whisper back, though we are quite alone, and only the twinkling eyes of the Great Bear are watching us from the sky through the uncurtained window.

‘How many guesses am I to have?’

‘Three.’

‘You meant me to understand, Pearl, that you hated the sound of the word marriage so much that, even if you were free, I could have no hope.’

I answer nothing, and my face remains steadily in its normal position.

‘You meant that, in spite of your aversion to marriage, if you were free you would sacrifice yourself just to please me.’

‘Twice wrong. Try to be right *this* time,’ I murmur, though I feel awfully guilty, for he must think I *wish* the third guess to be correct, for an ulterior motive.

‘You love me, Pearl, with all your heart and soul, and, if it was in your power, you would marry me, grey hairs and all.’

I draw back his head gently until his face is upturned, and then, with a thrill that goes through me from head to foot, I press just one tiny kiss on the middle of his forehead.

‘Ah, Miss Pearl, *vous allez bien*, as our neighbours across the Channel say. My assistance wanted?—for, like Sterne’s widow, you appeared to be extracting some irritant from Haviland’s eye.’ And the round black beads of Dr Rowe emit little sparks of intelligence while he scrutinises my scarlet countenance with undisguised curiosity. ‘Why, they gave me a woeful account of you—they told me you were pale and ill,—but you are ruddier than a cherry!’ he rattles on.

‘I am better now than I was,’ I answer, meekly, in the confusion of the moment.

A glimpse of a smile on my guardian’s face makes me at once realise the ridiculous speech I have made, and cherries would pale beside my cheeks. The doctor’s inopportune entrance has upset me, and it is some time before I recover my mental equilibrium.

Later on in the evening, when dinner is over and I pour out the coffee, the doctor notices my pallor—a pallor that has become habitual to my visage ever since the trying scenes I went through in Belgium. He hunts me into a far-off corner at last, and seizes my arm, laying his finger on my puny wrist and studying his watch.

‘Languid—dreadfully languid! You want a tonic. What shall I give you?’

‘How should I know? I am not up in medicine.’

‘What do you think of infinitesimal doses of Haviland’s society, with just a few drops of Mrs Talbot’s spite mixed in, to prevent cloying—eh? *Je suis malin*, as the French say.’

‘I am going to be married to Monsieur de Volnay next month, doctor,’ I tell him, gravely, in hopes of checking his badinage.

‘Are you? Well, of course you know best what is for your happiness. Any way, *Je vous felicite de tout mon cœur*—’

‘Never mind about congratulations,’ I interrupt him; ‘they will keep. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof, you know, doctor.’ And, leaving him staring at me, I say good-night.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

JACK.

'Ah me! for aught that ever I could read,
Could ever hear of tale or history,
The course of true love never did run smooth.'

'A GENTLEMAN to see you, miss,' in sonorous tones, and the crimson plush calves retire.

I am down on my knees, carefully and diligently pressing shoals of rose-leaves—pink, red, white, and yellow—into the depths of a gigantic Capo de Monti vase, where an aromatic bed receives them, for the purpose of '*pot-pourri*;' but I start up in surprise to see Jack, yet not Jack. A pale, weary-faced Jack, with all his former jollity vanished, with dark shadows that deepen the violet of his iris, and with not the glint of a smile upon his perfect lips. He reminds me vividly of papa in the latter days, and I look at him through a white mist.

'Oh, Jack, Jack!' I cry, impetuously; and thinking only of his wonderful resemblance to my dead father, and of all that has happened to my poor aunt since he and I met in London, I fling my arms round my cousin's neck and give him a hearty hug, just as if he was my brother.

He receives my embrace in an ominous silence, and gently repudiates my demonstrations by disengaging himself forthwith from my clasp.

Mortified feeling and astonishment unite in making me regard him with ill-concealed surprise, in which a little shame at my unreserved conduct mingles unpleasantly.

'Pearl, you really take my breath away,' is the extraordinary apology he offers for his ungracious reception of my sisterly salute; and he is evidently displeased at my undue familiarity, for he turns very red about the face, and his eyes shine out like big blue lights.

I draw back like a snail into my shell, grievously offended, and pride and dignity bristle up directly into a barricade that is dangerous for a breach; then I suddenly remember that it

is wiser to ignore the matter, which, after all, is the result of my own heedlessness.

'I had no idea you were coming to Glenthorn,' I venture to remark, in a formal tone, by way of setting the ball of conversation rolling.

'Did not Haviland tell you that he had written to ask me? He thought *you* might like to see me, Pearl.'

'I have heard nothing from him,' I answer, treating the last part of his sentence in silence, since his manner has considerably damped my pleasure at seeing him. 'You are not looking at all well,' I add, noticing that he waxes pale.

'I have been very ill, Pearl, ill in both body and mind. I can never forget all *she* must have suffered!'

And great drops gather in his violet eyes, calling up again, in spite of my wounded vanity, all the sympathy and pity that live in my nature.

'Pearl, I have wished to see you very much, for two reasons; one is to ask you all about *her*, the other reason—' He pauses a moment, as if reflecting, and flushes up; but evidently he thinks second thoughts are best, for he says, with a strange expression flitting across his mobile features, 'I will tell you later.'

Then he rises from his chair, and seats himself in one close to where I stand.

'Why did you not write to me directly she was—dead?' he questions, with a great falter in his tone.

'I did, Jack, but my letter must have miscarried.' And it flashes across me that Susanne, objecting to leave me all alone in that terrible house, entrusted the letter to the care of a little peasant girl, who probably converted it into waste paper.

'I was staying at a friend's place in the very heart of Northamptonshire, and I never even heard of what had occurred until she had lain in her grave many days. Oh! mother! mother! it kills me to think of all she went through in life, *and then the awful end!*'

'She could not have suffered much—it must have been instantaneous, Jack!' I whisper, in a hushed voice.

His face is buried in his hands, but I can see the veins in his forehead swell purple with his emotion. I throw my arm

round his shoulder, and pass my other hand soothingly and affectionately over the masses of his bright hair, in the excess of my commiseration. He does not cast me off this time, but catching the arm that embraces him, he draws it quite close, like a comforter round his neck.

I let him do it, though it strikes me very forcibly that grief has had the effect of making him exceedingly mutable in his moods, and that he is inclined to blow hot and cold.

‘Did that wretch ill-treat her all through?’

I remember the second night of my stay in Brussels, when, from my attic, I heard my aunt’s pitiful cry—a cry that seemed wrung from a tortured heart, ‘Don’t Jean! You hurt me, hurt me body and soul!’ and I shudder involuntarily.

‘He *did*, Pearl! I see it in your face!’

‘She loved him so desperately that even blows from *his* hand were not so hard to bear as they would have been from anyone else,’ I reply, in the hope of calming him a little.

‘The love she bore that wretch was the only thing that could have steeled my heart against her. How *could* she have wasted her deepest feelings on him, the low, murderous villain!’

I agree with him entirely, but in silence. Jacques La Porte, with his coarse thick lips, his bold black eyes, and the dreadful repugnance they inspired in me, are undying memories.

‘Pearl, did she ever seem to regret her marriage?’

Here I feel that I can comfort him in perfect sincerity.

‘Never. Notwithstanding cruelty and wrong, in spite of her excessive fear of him, I solemnly believe that it would have broken her heart to part with him,’ I say, earnestly.

‘What an extraordinary infatuation!’ he mutters.

‘We never can account for the extraordinary vagaries of love;’ and when I have said it I feel thoroughly ashamed of the platitude, for I know well enough that *reason* has been implanted by the Almighty in us in order that we may control the love that is unworthy or misplaced.

‘That is very true what you say, Pearl;’ and he jerks back his head on my arm, and uses it as a pillow, while he looks up in my face. ‘*We never can account for the extraordinary vagaries of love,*’ he repeats after me, verbatim, like a parrot;

and there is something strange again in his glance—a something that is indefinite, but which must have a certain amount of potency about it, for it makes me lower my eyelids, and causes me to feel slightly awkward and constrained. I draw away my arm from under his head, and he notices the action by a reproachful uplifting of his golden eyebrows. But my inmost soul is far too loyal to its *real* allegiance to allow of any further demonstrations on my part in the cause of sympathy and consolation ; and to avoid any risk of contact, I move off to a little distance.

There is a dead pause, while Jack beats an impatient tattoo with his boot on the floor, and I stare vacantly at anything but him.

‘That villain stole the Cathcart jewels too,’ he says, regretfully ; ‘jewels that should have been yours, Pearl.’

‘Why mine?’ I ask, in amazement.

He blushes furiously.

‘Why?—because—’ and he hesitates. ‘But never mind—I will tell you another time.’

Jewels are so small in my estimation that I do not care to press the subject—that is, jewels in general ; mine in particular, that were taken with my aunt’s, I regret daily, and often revert to.

‘My locket and bracelet went as well,’ I say, sorrowfully.

‘What! the bracelet that Haviland gave you on your birthday?’

‘Yes ;’ and as I think of my lost treasure tears spring up in my eyes. Jack reverses the virtuous axiom that bids us return good for evil, and looking spitefully at my wet lashes, he returns evil for good. Oblivious of the sympathy I have shown him in his distress, he says,—

‘Crying, Pearl, for a trumpery bit of finery! I am surprised at you!’

‘It was *not* a trumpery bit of finery! And even if it had been, I should cry about it all the same!’ I exclaim.

‘Just because that fellow Haviland gave it to you, I suppose. I do believe you are still hankering after him,’ he tells me contemptuously.

The lack of refinement in his expression hurts my ear, and I turn upon him angrily—

‘Please do not speak of my guardian in that tone, Jack—I would rather you did not speak of him at all indeed.’

‘Because it’s such a *tender* subject,’ he sneers.

I frown, but don’t reply.

‘There, Pearl, don’t be angry. I will promise to be good if you will kiss and be friends, as the children say.’

And a pair of violet eyes flash very close to my face, but I steadily refuse such child’s play. There are kisses and *kisses* in this world. There’s a kiss that fairly electrifies me, that warms my blood and sets my heart a-beating like a brass drum, and makes my eyes twinkle like stars on a frosty night. It isn’t a thing ever to be forgotten. No language can express it, no letters will give the sound. There is nothing in nature equal to it. It is spiritual, but it is neither visible nor tangible, it has neither colour nor form, and imagination cannot conceive it—it cannot be imitated or forged. It is disembodied when completed, but reproduced in fancy, and so it becomes immortal. And this kiss is *not* my cousin Jack’s. He sees that a barrier of some sort holds us apart, and he succumbs to necessity, and begins to discourse on graver subjects.

‘I went to see my mother’s grave, Pearl.’

Vividly by his remark he brings to my mind the horror and humiliation of spirit that I suffered, when I believed that she would be a recipient of public bounty in her coffin and her narrow bed. I dread to hear Jack sorrow over the meanness of her last resting-place.

‘The tomb is an exquisite piece of sculpture. I should not have thought that the money she left would have paid the expenses of it—she was always in such difficulties, poor mother!’

No need to guess that this is Sir Galahad’s good work, and he never so much as mentioned it to me. I do not let Jack into the secret, for I feel convinced that Sir Galahad would not wish it; but I keep the knowledge alive in my own heart, and I cannot resist stealing a fond glance at his face as he enters. Jack’s sharp eye intercepts it, and he scowls—unmistakably scowls as he shakes hands with the man whose generosity saved his mother from a pauper’s grave!

The conversation between the two is commonplace, and I resume my occupation of manufacturing *pot-pourri*.

'And now that you have come all this way, I hope you will stay with us as long as you like,' I hear my guardian say cordially as he leaves the room; and Jack forces a smile to his handsome mouth as he accepts the invitation.

All the rose-leaves are in the vase, and I look round, for there is a silence in the room, in which you could hear a pin fall. A thunder-cloud is enthroned on my cousin's brow—grief has rendered him not only mutable, but irritable.

'You have not asked after Mrs Talbot yet,' I say, a little mischievously, in the hope of dispelling some of his gloom.

'Why should I?—she is nothing whatever to me,' he flashes out scornfully.

'But she *was*, Jack. You know you were madly in love with her. You told me that you doted on her beauty, on her golden hair, and on all the other perfections she has.'

'Pshaw! a boy's folly, of which the man is ashamed. I did not know what love *was* at that time, Pearl,' he says, softly and a little sentimentally.

'It is only ten months ago,' I murmur, reducing sentiment to practical figures, and thereby denuding it of half its glamour.

'Ten months can bring considerable changes to a man, and I have had a good deal to change me.'

'True,' I reply, and I fall to thinking that ten months ago I was engaged to marry Bertrand de Volnay, and that I still remain in exactly the same position, so that time does not seem to work much change for me.

'Are you still going to marry that *horrible* Belgian?' Jack exclaims, abruptly, with an emphatic stress on the flattering adjective. Of course it is not marvellous that he should have an aversion to foreigners; but still I have a glimmering in my mind that, under my peculiar circumstances, it is my bounden duty to reprove him for applying such an expression to Bertrand; but, instead of listening to the voice of duty, I simply inform him quietly that I shall be Madame de Volnay on the fifteenth of next month.

Jack turns white, positively white, just the sort of unpleasant hue that is engendered by a sail on a very rough sea. Evidently this marriage revolts him too.

'How *can* you do it, Pearl?'

'It is my duty,' I answer, in a dreary tone. Duty under the guise of Bertrand, may, like virtue, have its own reward, but at present it wears a most uninviting aspect, and Jack does not help to raise its attractiveness by ejaculating more heartily than with a view to refinement.

'The beastly foreigner!'

'You really should not speak like that,' I remonstrate, mildly, with a dim idea that Bertrand and I are nearly 'one,' and that, in simple self-defence, I should pull him up.

'Why, does it hurt your feelings? do you love him?' he questions, bluntly, just like a raw schoolboy.

'I am going to try,' and I feel like a martyr who is condemned to walk on red-hot ploughshares for the term of his natural existence.

'Try! just as if love can be coerced,' he says, warmly. 'Love must have spontaneous growth—forced like an exotic, it never thrives; the first matrimonial breeze kills it.'

'What is love? an idle passion,
Sage advisers tell us so;
Can we treat it in this fashion?
Honest nature answers no.'

I tell him in a sing-song voice, a little *distrain*.

'Pearl, I believe you are heartless,' Jack cries, with the air of a skilful anatomist; and literally speaking he is right, for that portion of me to which he alludes left my possession long ago.

'I am heartless! because I am going to do my duty, even when it is against inclination!' and the striking injustice of the case makes my tone rather pathetic.

Jack blows hot, *very* hot.

'*Don't* speak in that voice, for mercy's sake! it goes through me. I am your only relative, Pearl. Give me the right to send this Belgian adrift, and then—' he stops short.

What then? I ponder; but I realise it all in the course of an instant. My engagement to Bertrand severed, and I free—free to—I raise my eyes, and I see Jack staring at me with an intensity in his gaze that is, to say the least, a little startling and bewildering. His boyish lips are slightly apart, and his fingers nervously twist and pull at the rather stunted end of

his fair moustache. In another instant he throws decorum to the four winds, his arms imprison me, and he pours out rapidly,—

‘All this while since we parted I have thought of you, dreamt of you, Pearl! I have learnt to love you—not with the senseless, ephemeral feeling that I expended on Miss Græme, but with a man’s love, strong, passionate, and enduring! If anything should happen to break off your engagement, Pearl, dear, darling Pearl! is there any hope for me?’

I cannot help seeing that he is really in sad, sober earnest, and I am sorry for him; he marks my hesitation.

‘Say that I may hope!’ he pleads, desperately hard, both with his voice and with his violet eyes.

‘No, Jack; do not ask it. I love you as a cousin, as a brother, but I could *never* marry you, Jack!’

I put his arms away from me gently, and he makes no effort to resist, but lets them drop to his sides in a hopeless sort of fashion. The brightness of his fair young face is dimmed, and I cannot bear to be the cause of sorrow and pain to him, but I am powerless.

‘Don’t be angry, Jack. Say that you forgive me.’

‘Yes, child, I forgive you. But take away your face out of my sight, for it makes me regret you more! Good-bye, Pearl.’

‘Good-bye, Jack,’ I say, tearfully, and I humbly offer him five cold fingers. He looks at them in a hungry way, and then he seizes and kisses them a dozen times.

I am not surprised, when I go down to dinner, to hear my guardian say,—

‘Fancy Temple being gone! How strange and incoherent he has grown! His mother’s fate has altered him amazingly, poor fellow!’

‘Yes,’ I answer; but I keep the alteration in Jack’s feelings towards me a profound secret in my own breast, for I know that the love I have been offered is too genuine to be babbled about.

CHAPTER XL.

ORANGE BLOSSOMS.

'What do you think of marriage ?
I take't as those that deny purgatory,
It locally contains or heaven or hell,
There's no third place in it.'

THE fourteenth of May, the merry month of May. 'Of all the glad new year, the maddest and the merriest month.' And to-morrow Bertrand will be here. It is a fortnight now since he wrote fixing the date of his arrival, and praying that the wedding should not be delayed. My promise to him has become due, and it must be kept. I am miserable, and call philosophy to my aid, but philosophy is a bully that talks very loud when the danger is at a distance, but the moment she is hard pressed by the enemy she is not to be found at her post. Philosophy can hold an easy triumph over the misfortunes which are past and to come, but those which are present triumph over her. And hopeless and helpless I await my bridegroom, with a blanched face and an aching heart.

On my bed lies my wedding-dress—a white wedding-dress, virginal, pure ; every fold of the shining satin is smoothed, and priceless lace, like fairy cobweb, is displayed by the admiring hands of Susanne. Oh mockery again of life, when black should be my garb, to mourn my dead past in ! A wild fantasy seizes me to don my bridal paraphernalia at once. Obeying the mighty impulse, I call Susanne to help me, and, quick as lightning, the soft bright satin trails behind me, the fleecy veil envelops my figure, and the coronet of orange blossoms crowns my brow. In this attire, without pausing to think, I fly downstairs, and without the ceremony of knocking, I walk into the library, where my guardian sits alone.

'What do you think of me?' I ask him, in light, ringing accents, as though I were as happy and blithesome as a bird.

He stares at me as if I was mad, while his face grows ashy-hued. I *feel* mad, and a strange, heavy weight seems to be crushing down my brain.

'Oh, child, how cruel of you! I could not have believed it!' he says, dropping each word slowly, and studying my features one by one, as if he were committing them to memory before taking a last farewell.

I laugh out brightly.

'You have not told me yet what you think of me. Do I not make a beautiful bride?'

He rises from his chair; for one moment he staggers as if he was drunk; then he comes forward, and, for the first time, his hard grasp hurts me. Involuntarily I shrink from his touch.

'You hurt me!' I cry.

'*And you hurt me!* God in heaven! is it not enough to face the *real* marriage, that will spoil my life and crumble to ashes every hope of happiness I have in this world, without my being forced to witness this wretched travestie—this dress-rehearsal of a happy wedding. Oh, Pearl, how I scorn myself for having worshipped so long and so blindly—not a loving, true, and tender woman, but a worthless, soulless, dressed-up doll!'

I am sobered. All the laughter has left my lips at his words; they are the first words of contempt that his heart has hurled at mine. This man, who is dearer to me than light, who mingles with my life and forms my very soul, scorns me!

I totter forward, and fall on the sofa, unmindful of my finery, and the lace veil catches in the fret-work and is rent in twain. My guardian stands erect, his arms folded tightly across his breast, the lines round his mouth are hard and relentless, and his eyes are cold—so *dreadfully* cold that when I meet them I shiver all over. And this is my last day—*our* last day—before Bertrand comes to take me away. The thought fires my brain! I look at him pitifully, my lips quivering, my eyes full of tears; but for the first time he turns away from them, and with a quick, gasping cry, that it is impossible for me to restrain, I leave the sofa and go towards the door. The rustle of my train attracts his notice.

'One moment, please.'

At the sound of his voice, so changed and so stern, I pause at once, but I make no effort to retrace my steps; I only hold on tightly to the handle of the door, for the room seems to

heave like a vessel, and all the furniture in it turns into whirligigs

‘Pearl!’

‘Yes,’—a little feeble, fluttering ‘Yes,’ that I think can barely reach him.

‘Did you come down here, attired like this, just for the purpose of feasting your vanity on harrowed feelings and a sorely wounded heart?’ he questions, in a harsh tone.

I do not answer a word, for the simple reason that all eloquence is denied me—that I *have* no reason to give for my insane folly, save the excitement—the heat of the moment,—and a strange, feverish desire to try to make him as miserable as I am myself.

He waits a few minutes for my self-exculpation, but it does not come. Throwing himself into a seat near the table, he lays his head down on his folded arms; and then a sound falls on my ear—the sound of a horrible, harrowing sob, that breaks from a man’s great but tearless misery.

I cast myself on the floor by his side in a white heap, and, with the last fragment of strength that appears to be left in me, I draw away one of his hands and press my lips on it. The effect of my action is to make him stoop and look steadily at me: then he clasps my hands.

‘Your lips are burning, your cheeks are flushed, and your eyes glitter! Pearl—Pearl, are you ill?’ he asks, in undisguised anxiety.

‘I feel strange,’ I murmur languidly.

The pressure on my brain grows heavier, but the signs of his affection and solicitude are meat and drink to my soul, that hungers and thirsts for them, and cannot live without them. My head rests against his knee, and my bridal wreath has fallen off my hair on to the ground. I let it lie there neglected and forgotten for a while, and my brow feels cooler with the emblem flowers of a hateful bondage gone.

‘Pearl, forgive me—forgive all my harshness—my cruelty just now! God knows each word I said in rebuke to you was a stab in my own heart—for, Pearl, you are as my own life—what hurts you hurts me!’

‘How can you waste love on a worthless, soulless doll?’

I whisper ; but, for fear he should think that I bear him malice for these words, I try to smile faintly.

‘Hush ! They were the first harsh, unkind words that have ever fallen from my lips to you—they will be the very last ! Do not remember them against me, Pearl—do not let them harden your heart. This is our last day—it is the last time that I can clasp your hand and tell you how much you are to me,—for to-morrow another man will be by your side ; and then, Pearl’—his voice breaks and he stops for an instant,—‘a little while, and you will be out of my reach for ever !’

‘No, no !’ I cry.

I cling to him passionately and wreath my arms round his neck, and his face rests close against my own.

‘Let this cup pass from me !’ I pray, in bitter agony of spirit.

I feel that I *cannot* leave him—that honour, duty—all—all are nought in the scale with my love for him ! My guardian’s eyes have dark bistre shades beneath them, and their depths are wan and weary, and his fingers tremble as he softly smoothes back the hair that has become loosened from my comb and falls over my face.

‘My child !—my poor little Pearl !—you will make yourself ill ! Go and take off these “trappings of woe,” that hurt me to look at, and come back here.’

He helps me up to do his bidding, but as I reach the door it opens, and Mrs Haviland comes in. She gazes at me in unfeigned astonishment, and no marvel. I stand before her, my silken sheen all crumpled, my veil torn, and my cheeks all flushed and tear-stained—the very antipodes of a happy bride. Her face wears an expression of alarm and horror.

‘Oh ! Pearl, what made you dress in these ?’ she asks, nervously, pointing to my novel garments. ‘Do you not know, child, that there is nothing so unlucky as putting on your wedding-dress before the bridal day ? Something *awful* will happen,’ she adds, with an air of conviction.

‘That is only a foolish saw,’ I say, lightly, to hide my feelings of misery—‘nothing *can* happen—it is too late for a reprieve.’

‘And, Pearl, look at that wreath—it is quite spoilt.’
True enough. The white blossoms are in a shapeless mass—my guardian’s foot has crushed them.

CHAPTER XLI.

A LONG REPRIEVE.

‘One of those terrible moments when the wheel of passion stands suddenly still.’

I STOOP mechanically and pick up the wreath, and to save myself the trouble of carrying it, I stick it carelessly on my head, and, thus crowned with battered blossoms, like mad Ophelia, I mount the stairs slowly and listlessly in Mrs Haviland’s wake. When I arrive as far as the first landing, the sound of a strange voice meets my ear, and leaning over the balustrade I look to see whose voice it is. A man stands in the hall with a long-shaped yellow envelope in his hand, that I recognise at once as containing a telegram. A telegram from Bertrand perhaps—a blessed reprieve!

‘The miserable hath no other medicine
But only hope.’

And hope now floods my heart, and makes it beat fast, as on the spur of the moment I run down again and walk into the library. My guardian stands near the window, apparently gazing out on the fair prospect, but the yellow envelope is in his grasp. His back is towards me, but he turns round when he hears me enter. I go forward with features flushed with excitement—features on which I know hope sits enthroned.

‘What is it?’ I cry, impatiently, with an anticipation of good news ringing in my tone. ‘Is it from Belgium?—is it a reprieve? Tell me quickly, Mr Haviland!’ I beg, with clasped hands.

He approaches me and takes both my hands, and there is a strange, awe-struck expression on his face.

'You must try to be brave, Pearl! It is a reprieve, and a *very long one indeed!*' he says, in a hushed voice.

I know at once that my sinful prayer is granted, and that *Bertrand is dead!* The sudden shock takes away my breath and my strength, and helplessly I fall upon my knees.

'Do you think that God will punish me?' I whisper low, through trembling lips, for it seems to me as though I were a murderess—a fit descendant of my uncle, Jacques La Porte.

'Why should God punish you, dear child?'

'Because I have not kept my promise to papa *in the spirit*—because there was murder in my heart! For there *was* murder in it, though I would not let myself think so!' I burst out passionately. 'Yet I *meant* to marry him. I meant to keep my promise to papa! Oh! Bertrand! Bertrand!'

My guardian listens to my bitter wailing, but he does not speak a word. He knows it is no time for him to show what is in his heart; that it is no time to think of what may be, when Bertrand is not yet laid in his grave. He only passes his arm lightly round my shoulders as I kneel with my face bowed upon his knees, and even in this terrible moment, when the wheel of passion stands suddenly still, the touch of his arm thrills me.

I can see Bertrand now as I saw him last—in the full flush of youth and strength, of health and hope. His dark eyes bright, and a pale gleam of the wintry sun lighting up his uncovered head as with a glance half shy, half fond, he said 'Good-bye.' With this image before me, it is impossible to realise that Bertrand is dead!—that I am free!

'How was it?' I ask at last, with white, shaking lips and streaming eyes.

'Killed by a fall from a horse. This is all this says,' my guardian answers, and there is a deep gravity in his accents that touches me inexpressibly. Petty jealousy has no place in his breast, and he does not reprove my outspoken grief, or grudge the tears that are but a poor tribute to the dead, whom I so wronged in life.

'Who sent this?' I ask, touching the document that contains my fate with a curious awe.

'Henri de Volnay, his father, I suppose.'

I remember him well, though I have seen but little of him, and that long ago, when papa and I first went to La Roche. An old meek-faced, grey-haired man, to whom this only son was as the apple of his eye, the one being that was *everything* to him in the wide, wide world, on whom his hopes were laid, in whom his happiness was bound—God comfort him ! I picture to myself the grey hairs bending low in sorrow, the poor withered hands tenderly closing the lids upon the bright dark eyes, the meek face bowed in prayer !

‘I feel ill !—ill !’ I murmur, faintly, as I fall forward on the floor ; the room is stifling, and my head goes round. There is chaos everywhere.

Two strong arms gather me up close—close. A voice, my guardian’s voice, says in my ear, ‘Pearl ! my *own* Pearl !’ and I hear no more.

CHAPTER XLII.

ENCORE LE DÉLIRE.

‘In many ways does the full heart reveal
The presence of the love it would conceal.’

A PLEASANT shadow. The blinds are down and the lace curtains drawn by a careful hand together, while the window, partially open, admits the delicious fragrance of summer flowers into my sick-room. It is very late in the day. I know that, for I catch the sun god peeping through every chink, and a thousand beams are dancing on the sill.

‘Susanne,’ I call in a feeble, fluttering voice, but she hears me at once. She trots in from the adjoining room which she has converted into a *petit salon*, and in which she sits as busy as a bee, knitting stockings, apparently for a gaint race, while I sleep or take my walks abroad. Her face is more than usually round, and ruddy, and bright as a full moon when she says with genuine pleasure,—

‘Oh, *mon enfant*, *tu vas bien donc.*’

I look at her in surprise, and rub my eyes to assist my memory.

'Have I been ill, then?' I ask her. I do not *feel* ill, only just a shade of languor hangs over me, giving me the desire to lie still and quiet, and yet to avoid thought. But quietude is out of the question. My *bonne* is not of a reticent nature; like most foreign women, she has little control over her unruly member, and is never so happy as when it wags apace.

'You have been very ill, mademoiselle, ever since you heard of—' she hesitates, as if afraid to allude to the primary cause of my illness.

'Monsieur de Volnay's death,' I finish the sentence.

And the embodiment of the fact in words makes remembrance vivid.

'How long have I been lying here?' I ask, wearily.

'Let me see.' Like me, Susanne is not strong in arithmetic, and she counts on her thick red fingers. 'It was Monday when Monsieur Haviland carried you up here. It is Monday now, but there was a Monday between as well.'

The elucidation is puzzling, especially as it is in *patois*, but I arrive at it.

'A whole fortnight!' I say, in surprise.

'Yes, and you talked and cried in your fever; and at last we were afraid you were going to die, but the little doctor is a clever man.'

I talked in my fever, Susanne says; I wonder what secrets Doctor Rowe found out, and whether Jacques La Porte occupied a prominent position in my ravings. The fear of this makes me feel uncomfortable and restless. The languor has left me, and I have an earnest desire to be up, so that I may, in some way, solve the question that worries me.

'Dress me at once, Susanne.'

She opens two eyes—eyes that are really gooseberry green, very wide, and her face loses in breadth to gain considerably in length.

'No, mademoiselle, you must keep perfectly still, and as quiet as a mouse; this was my order,' and she stations herself as a sentinel by the bed.

'Very well, stick to your orders, I can dress myself,' I say, impetuously; and out goes one foot, and then the other, but

with the same hesitating plunge that characterises ducklings on the first trial of their natural element.

Susanne, stolid and useless, the picture of dismay, watches me. But my valour is only skin-deep, for, as I attempt to stand, I stagger forward into her ample arms, where I remain imprisoned for fully five minutes.

'Let me call madame, or monsieur,' she begs, as she deposits me half fainting on the bed again.

But I rally at her suggestion.

'What, when I am like this?' And I point to my *déshabillé*, which does not impress me as quite the toilette for a reception.

'Oh, it does not matter,' she remarks, indifferently; 'monsieur has seen you like that.'

'Has he?' And the idea of the figure I must have presented to his eyes makes me blush painfully.

'He came one day with the doctor when you were very bad, and stayed here over an hour.'

The day on which my ravings were at their worst, she means. This piece of information incites me still further to exert myself.

'Susanne, wrap me up in something—it does not signify what, so long as I can go downstairs.'

She sees that I am determined to rise, whether she will or not, so she goes off on a search for a fit garment to make my *début* into the world which I have pretty nearly gone out of.

Dress is pomp—a work of the devil, my poor aunt said, and to my mind, that is filled with morbid fancies, the niece of Jacques La Porte should be in a chronic condition of sack-cloth and ashes. Susanne brings me a flowing white dressing-gown, all trimmed and furbelowed with lace and dainty blue ribbon. Blue is the colour of my guardian's eyes—*ergo*, it is my favourite hue, and every shade of it, from sky to deepest purple, adorns the extensive wardrobe that, through Mrs Haviland's lavish kindness and liberality, I call mine.

I glance at the robe—it may be a work of the devil—a pomp and vanity, yet I glance at it tenderly. But Bertrand is dead—Bertrand who, if he had lived, would now have been my husband—to whom I should have belonged in all save

my heart ! For the nonce let me respect his memory, and forget the hue of the eyes I love.

‘Take this away, and bring me something black, Susanne.’

She retires obediently with the rejected garment, and returns with an old black wrapper that I used to wear in Belgium ; and, dressed in this, with no gleam of colour to relieve it, and with my hair pushed off my pallid face and hanging carelessly in rough masses down my back, I am ready to descend.

‘You will not be able to walk down, mademoiselle.’

‘Yes, I can, with your arm to help me,’ I reply, wilfully.

I have the same tenacity as most of Eve’s daughters to get my own way when I can, and she sees that it is useless to waste her breath in further argument.

By the aid of her arm—the muscular development of which a pugilist might be envious—I crawl slowly but surely down till I reach a long glass door in the hall that opens on to the lawn ; but I can go no farther. Down I settle on the stone step, bidding Susanne leave me to my own devices for a little while.

She examines doubtfully the probabilities of my being in a condition to take care of myself, and then reluctantly disappears. The very languor that pervades my frame doubly enhances the enjoyment I feel in the lazy summer air that comes to me redolent of perfume. The sky seems to show up a deeper crimson, the flowers are more odorous, the garden birds sing louder than is their wont, and the sun laughs with unusual radiance over the gaudy earth. Bright clouds yonder look like motionless pillars of heaven ; the pines just bend their proud tops, and the glorious yellow light bathes me from head to foot, and dazzles my eyes, so that I shade them with my hand. At this moment the very fact of existence is a blessed boon. Close to where I sit basking is the verandah, that is trellised with passion flowers, and a moment after I have taken up my position on the step, which is within a niche in the wall, I know that the verandah is tenanted.

‘She *is* better, doctor?—there is no danger now?’ my guardian questions, anxiously.

‘She *is* better, but she might easily take a change for the worse—*telle est la vie*, as the French have it.’

'Do not say that, for God's sake! Give me some hope, some comfort, if you can,' a dear voice beseeches.

'Robert, you must excuse my telling you that you really carry your zeal as guardian to excess. Miss Pearl ought to be very fond and very grateful, but, like all her sex, gratitude is a word that does not exist in her dictionary, and she has no notion of what is right. Instead of fretting her soul out for the loss of that poor dead Belgian, she ought to be appreciating your merits—*je ne la comprend pas* as—' but he is interrupted.

'Doctor, *have* you a good opinion of Pearl's case?—*do* not keep me in suspense like this!'

Evidently the round black beads have been employed in taking observations while Sir Galahad speaks.

'Why, Robert, I never saw you in such a state before! I always fancied you a bit of a misogynist—*et je ne suis pas bête ordinairement*. Now what is it that you really wish to know?'

'About Pearl?'

'Is it really a matter of importance to you? Miss Pearl is a very nice little girl, pretty, *charmante*, in fact—but all that does not concern you, as you are not in love with her *Je le sais bien*, as our neighbours across the Channel say,' he replies, provokingly.

'Not in love with her?—not in love with Pearl? Why, I love her with my whole heart and soul! Oh! doctor, if anything were to happen *now* to snatch her from me, I believe I should never be able to look up again!'

My darling! my darling! how my heart goes out to him as he says this! I long to let him know that I am here, and that if I were at the very portals of the grave, I think his voice could call me back again. The unfeigned pathos of his tone, that carries belief with it, forces even his companion to be serious, and to forget the inevitable morsels of French for a little while.

'Miss Pearl has youth in her favour, and an excellent constitution besides, to help recovery; and while there's life there's hope. But if you love her like this, Robert, why, by all that is ridiculous, have you concealed the fact so long, when you must have known that she was breaking her heart for you all the time?'

My guardian is silent ; perhaps he is thinking that, considering the position I have been in up to the present time, he has not succeeded in concealing his feelings towards me as well as he should have done. A short pause, and then he says, a little Jesuitically,—

‘She was not free to accept my love, you know. How could I tell her of my feelings when her hand was promised to another. Besides, you said just now yourself, doctor, that she is fretting her soul out for Bertrand de Volnay.’

This last in an aggrieved tone.

‘And so she is, and so she ought ! She knows very well that she has been wronging him all the time she was loving you, thinking of you, pouring out her heart at your feet. And now, when the poor fellow she treated so badly is dead and gone, she is full of remorse and penitence for her shortcomings. Just like her sex—*et je connais bien les femmes*. I should not be surprised if all this remorse and penitence bring on a bad result.’

‘You think she may *die*, doctor ?’ and the voice that says this is so piteous that I determine to show myself at once ; but the doctor’s words arrest me the next moment.

‘Die ?—no—fudge ! She is not thinking of dying ; but I should not be surprised if she insisted on going into a convent, and taking the black veil, so that she may spend the rest of her days in prayers for the poor Belgian’s soul—unless, indeed, you make up your mind to speak out soon, Robert. I will go up and see how she is getting on ;’ and the patter of his little feet making short, quick steps resounds on the tessellated flooring.

Gathering together all the strength I can find, I creep round the end of the verandah until I reach an aperture in the trellis-work that forms a sort of narrow door ; here I stand and look in. The unwonted exertion of walking has had the effect of paling my cheeks, and the pallor is probably increased by the shadow of the passion-flower leaves that enframe my head ; for, by the scared expression of my guardian’s features, I know that he takes me for my own wraith. But ghosts do not smile as a rule—at least, not the traditional ones ; and as a faint little glimmer of a smile goes to my mouth, he finds out that it is myself in the flesh

In a second he lifts me inside the verandah, and installs me comfortably on a maroon velvet divan; and here I lie, corporeally weak and useless, but mentally content.

I am not looking at him, but I know that he is looking at me. I *feel* it.

'Darling, how white and frail you are! It was very imprudent of you to run such a risk. You should not have come down,' he murmurs; and I remember at once *why* I came down, and go to the point without circumlocution.

'Susanne told me that I talked a great deal in my fever. What did I talk about?' I ask, anxiously.

'About nothing very particular, Pearl.'

'Yes, but what? Did I mention about *him*—about Jacques La Porte—before the doctor?'

'Not a single word.'

I breathe freely again. Jacques La Porte is the *bête noire* of my existence, and his unpleasant memory bestrides me heavily and treacherously, like the Old Man of the Sea. I cannot shake him off, do what I will.

'But you spoke of some one else—of some one that you loved, and at the loss of whom you would die,' my guardian tells me, in a strange tone.

There is only one man that I love in all the world, and that is the one by my side. In my ravings I have confessed to this. The thought is attended with a little shyness, and I blush as I glance up. There is a flush on *his* cheek, and a pained look in his blue eyes that surprises me.

'Did I say the name?'

'Bertrand de Volnay.'

I flinch visibly. I am not able to think of Bertrand, or to speak of him calmly, *yet*. As Dr Rowe said, I am brimful of remorse and penitence for my wrongs to the dead. Sir Galahad remarks the gesture.

'Perhaps you have been deceiving yourself, after all, Pearl,' he says, gravely and sorrowfully.

'Deceiving myself!—how?'

'By fancying that it was I whom you cared for. You have grieved for your Belgian lover so much, you have nearly died for the loss of him!' he whispers, in a tone that has lost its bright ring.

And so my guardian is human, after all ! But though I find it out, I love him doubly, nay trebly, for the leaven of jealousy that peeps out.

‘I do not think that I am a victim of self-delusion.’

‘Only *think*, Pearl—you are not *sure* ?’

‘I am *sure* I am not.’

His soul is evidently hankering after affection, for he goes on pertinaciously.

‘Then it is I whom you like really and truly, in spite of all you said in the fever ?’

‘I do not *like* you !’

‘*Love*, then ?’

But it is too soon after Bertrand’s death to dwell on this subject ; and though every inch of my heart is filled with the love he wants, although that love impels me to throw my arms round him, to press the heart that beats for him to his, to rain down kisses on his dear face, I turn away from him, and dreamily watch the tender buds of the passion-flower drooping under the sunlight, and the radiant-winged butterflies skimming gaily over the glossy leaves.

‘So *here* you are,’ growls Dr Rowe, striding up to us with knitted brows, that make his bald head look like an ill-fitting skull-cap, full of puckers. He seizes my puny wrist and feels my pulse.

‘Galloping, and no wonder,’ he says, shortly, flinging an angry look at my guardian, who turns white, then red, and then white again, while his face falls.

‘Is she worse ?’ he asks, in a faltering voice.

I put out surreptitiously a poor thin little hand to comfort him, and it hides itself in his palm, and remains there comfortably, and I hope unnoticed.

‘You must really go upstairs, Miss Pearl ; and, what is more, you must remain there till further notice,’ the doctor orders, peremptorily

‘You must indeed, Pearl,’ chimes in Mrs Haviland, who has entered, and forms one of the conclave sitting upon me.

I resist being banished like a naughty school-girl, with a grimace and a gesture of discontent.

‘I am so comfortable here, and the sunshine does me good.’

‘Very well—remain and kill yourself; and let me tell *you*, Haviland, that the responsibility lies on your shoulders, as you choose to detain her here.’

I glance furtively at the shoulders alluded to. They loom up so broad and strong that I long to rest my weary head on them.

‘I am not keeping her,’ Sir Galahad answers deprecatingly and alarmed.

‘I do not know so much about that—you have a tight hold of her hand, anyhow.’

‘The little black beads, sharp as a terrier’s, have ferreted us out. I blush, and the blush reflects itself on my guardian’s cheek, and our palms dissolve partnership hastily.

Presently I prove that the doctor is right, for a languor overpowers me, and involuntarily I close my eyes.

‘Here, take her at once, Haviland!’

Pillowed on the shoulder I had looked at longingly a few moments before, and clasped in Sir Galahad’s arms, I commence my journey upward.

‘I can walk—I am too heavy for you to carry,’ I say, faintly, but with a fervent hope that he will not take me at my word.

And even while I speak I turn my head into a more easy position, and my brow rests against his neck.

‘My little one!—my darling!—my *all*!’ he whispers, in a tone that sends the blood wildly up in my face.

‘*Dieu! comme elle a la fièvre!*’ Susanne ejaculates, compassionately, when I reach my room.

I cannot resist glancing at my guardian as she says this, and laughing,—

‘*Tiens! encore le délire!*’

Sir Galahad stoops over me.

‘Is she right, Pearl?—is it a delirium of love?’ And eyes like bluest sapphires and brightest stars look right down into mine with a passion that is unspeakable.

I think of Bertrand and am silent; but I cannot hide the expression of my face, and he goes away satisfied.

CHAPTER XLIII.

GNAT-STINGS.

'There is a comfort in the strength of love
'Twill make a thing endurable, which else
Would overset the brain or break the heart.'

'SO, Pearl, you are in the market again?' Mrs Talbot tells me sharply; and she sweeps her cold hazel eyes over me as if she were an auctioneer, taking in all my saleable points.

'In the market?' I repeat, slowly.

My Franco-English ears do not for a moment take in the meaning of her expression, although it sounds to them as lacking slightly in refinement.

'Yes, in the market—in the matrimonial mart. Aimée Cathcart, aged twenty, short and swarthy, and minus *dot*, available for the highest bidder,' she explains.

It is not a pleasing picture, truly, either of my personal attractions or of my deplorable position in life. My exaggerated gnat buzzes round me, inflicting stings, but fortunately I am sting-proof.

Girt in a strong armour of love, with a shield of infinite trust and faith buckled tightly to my breast, I feel in the innermost depths of my being that I am not for sale—that, in fact, I have already found a purchaser for the unattractive wares put down to my account—a purchaser who will cherish me as dearly as though I had been big and fair and the heiress to millions. Thus I can afford to make merry at my companion, and I look at her with an expression that is meant to convey to her rather obtuse understanding a sense of my new-born imperiousness. She sits bolt upright in a chair by the sofa on which I lie, with the luxury and laziness of an Eastern queen. She told me on her entrance that this was a visit of condolence on my illness, and congratulation on my convalescence, and therefore I seek but vainly to rake out of a mass of ill-nature a few morsels of sweetness and sympathy.

Mrs Talbot, refulgent in rich colours, and with a Rem-

brandt hat and waving plumes, appears to my prejudiced vision in the light of a huge bird of prey decked out in vivid plumage.

‘You certainly do not embody my ideas of a being afflicted both mentally and bodily,’ she jerks out, with a snap, as if she had come to visit a lunatic and a cripple; and she gives a stony stare at my features for several moments. ‘In fact, Pearl, save that you are thinner—and I cannot understand how that can be, for you were thin enough in all conscience before!’ and she glances complacently in an opposite mirror at her own ample proportions—‘I really think you are extra blooming, with not a single sign of depression about you!’

A little regret tinges her tone, as if she were lamenting over an incorrigible weed that would grow apace and flourish, in spite of her strenuous efforts to nip it in the bud. I laugh out quite brightly, for I know *whose* hand has fostered the blooming roses on my cheek, the happiness that is in my soul; and I feel that, so long as that hand is near to guide and guard me, a mental covering tough as an elephant’s hide will protect my heart from all cruel shafts and stings. To Mrs Talbot the exuberance of my mood is decidedly unsatisfactory, and she coagulates at once into lemon barley-sugar.

‘Well, I *am* glad, Pearl, my dear, that you *can* be so lively! I was so afraid the recent shocking events would have completely crushed your spirit. But some people are naturally so uppish that even sorrow cannot oppress them. I could never understand what hard materials nature used in their composition!—whilst others again feel so very deeply.’

‘Like you, I suppose?—who are made of sugar and spice, and all that’s nice.’

She looks a little cross at my laughing at her.

‘I have so much at present to be thankful for, that it seems to me that my blessings more than counterbalance my troubles,’ I continue, vaguely, in order to mystify her.

‘What *especial* blessings, might I ask?’ she questions eagerly, with a pink flush mounting over the surface of her large white face. I know she is thinking of my guardian as the sweetener of my cup, and I grow a little hard as I remember how she has striven to raise up blocks and nettles between him and me.

'I have learnt reserve from my betters,' I reply, demurely, but with an uncontrollable smile on my lips. 'You would not allow me to know whom you were about to honour with your hand until it was an *affaire finie*.'

'We are differently situated. It could not have interested you to know that I was going to marry Mr Talbot.'

'And it *does* interest you to know whether I am going to marry Mr Haviland!'

'Such an absurd, insane idea never entered my head!' she answers, scornfully and untruthfully. 'You are so unsuited in everything that marriage between you would be downright misery,' is her sweeping clause.

When she says this, there rise up before me a pair of blue eyes that brighten as I approach—a tender smile that welcomes my presence, and strong arms that draw closely round me. I remember the love that I have aroused, that I have called to the surface from its fountain, the love that, boiling up from its placid depths, has become like a sweeping torrent in its impetuosity, rising up and surmounting with fury all the obstacles in its path—a great love, that seemed to gather strength from obstruction—a love dominant and all-conquering and infinite.

'Marriage between you would be downright misery!' she says, in cold blood.

Misery!—forsooth!—I throw off the ominous word as lightly as though it were a speck of mud or a diminutive insect: but I am not going to discuss the probabilities of my happiness with her.

'Different people have different opinions,' I platitudinise, suppressing, for the sake of politeness, an obtrusive yawn. 'Shall we go downstairs?'

She assents, willing no doubt to note for herself how my glorious land of promise really lies. We enter the drawing-room together, and the picture I conjured up above in imagination is realised. A pair of blue eyes shine out a glad welcome, a mouth smiles with ineffable love in its smile, only the strong arms are withheld, bound to be passive by the trammels of the *convenances*. Of course, Mrs Talbot's sharp gaze marks it all, for her pretty golden brows claim close affinity, and her stereotyped sugary expression deserts her for a while.

My guardian rises quickly from his seat—a lounge of capacious depth and velvety softness, and before he recollects to acknowledge the presence of his cousin, takes me gently by the shoulders and deposits me in the place he has vacated. The action is simply one of kindness, but the manner of it is openly, unmistakably lover-like. He rushes for a footstool, on which I repose my feet; and not satisfied with his devices for my comfort, he seizes upon a cushion that is elaborately embroidered with the Haviland crest and arms in gorgeous silk and glittering beads, and squeezing it up into an unshapely mass, he stuffs it, indifferent to the marring of its beauty and puffiness, under my head. The cushion is a *chef-d'œuvre* of Mrs Talbot's white fingers, and she eyes its desecration wrathfully. The *pattes de velour* crawl out.

'One would think, Pearl, you had been brought up a fine lady all your life, instead of having had to rough it more than most girls.'

'True! and it is for this very reason that luxury has such a charm for me. I never intend moving a finger in my own service again—it is so pleasant to have a devoted slave,' I reply, with assumed languor and the air of an empress. And I smile benignly on my guardian in return for his attentions. I let him pay me these *petits soins* just because it pleases him; while I look forward to the time when it will be my turn to try to make home for him the earthly paradise it will be to me.

Mrs Talbot glowers on us.

'Why, Robert, what has come to you? You have turned into a regular *garde malade*. If there is anything I hate, it is to see a man fussing over women—he always looks so dreadfully out of place. I wouldn't allow Reggy to sacrifice his dignity to my comfort on any account!' she cries, with a toss of her plumed head that causes her to resemble still more that *rara avis*—a bird of prey with gaudy feathers.

The idea of uniting in one breath, Mrs Talbot's 'Reggy' and 'dignity' makes me laugh quietly, the two things are so very antipodean.

'Talbot is married, and married men often forget to "fuss," as you call it, Mimi, even when their wives would approve.'

'Then if you should ever marry, you would not make an attentive Darby to your Joan?' she questions, with a quick

glance at me that says, plainly enough, 'You see what depths of misery lie before you!'

'No, I should be a veritable Petruchio, and make my wife fuss over me, whether she would or not,' he replies, with a smile. 'Do you think any woman would care for such a lot, Pearl?'

'Some might,' I answer with a fervency that I forget to control.

'I think metaphors and inuendoes are in bad taste, and awful things, especially at midsummer, when all superfluous exertion is to be avoided? Why *don't* you speak out honestly, Pearl, instead of beating around the bush, and say that you would like to be Katherine to Robert's Petruchio!' Mrs Talbot exclaims irritably, reddening up like a peony under the mingled influence of vexation, costly garments, and the hot sunshine that streams in full upon her. I feel a little shy and uncomfortable in this inquisitorial chamber, and my guardian notices it. He is very tender of me, and would not let the wind blow too roughly on me if he could help it.

'Mimi,' he says, very gravely, and with just a faint touch of Sir Charles Grandison about him, 'Pearl is a great deal too sweet and too gentle to require any taming hand over her. But some day, not very distant, God willing, she will be my own dear wife, my priceless Pearl!' and his blue eyes seek more pertinaciously to discover what I think of so brave an avowal before the enemy.

For my answer I just lay my hand on his arm with an air of possession. The arm belongs to me. It will be, please Heaven, my stay and support through life, and I claim it mutely but unhesitatingly before her.

'Two is company, and three is none,' Mrs Talbot says, peevishly, with a reckless indifference to Lindley Murray's Grammar. Spleen shows itself in her face and in her voice as she adds, 'Let me congratulate you, and then I'll be off, for Reggy is waiting for me at home.'

Alas! poor dignified Reggy, he is to be pitied, I think, if she does not recover her serenity in the course of her long drive to Blechington.

'I hope and trust that you two will be happy, and not find out, when it is too late, that you have made a terrible mistake!'

she tells us, in a low, despondent tone ; and she does not attempt to offer me a congratulatory salute, but she does not forget to lift up her beautiful face with red tempting lips, for my guardian, just as she used to do in the olden days.

I suffered *then*—I suffer more now, now that the mou-stached lip near me is my property. Hydra-headed, green-eyed jealousy prompts me, and I give the arm I still clasp a hard, admonitory pinch, heedless of the unpleasant impression I leave. My guardian avoids the Circean mouth as if it were a pitfall, and tenders his free hand for a conventional shake.

‘Thank you very much, Mimi ; your congratulations are a little depressing, I confess, still I have enormous faith in my own judgment, and I do not think we have made a mistake—have we, Pearl ?’

‘Certainly not,’ I answer, decisively, and Mrs Talbot waits to hear no more, but rustles out of the room in her long mauve train, and wearing a glum look on her countenance at her cousin’s inevitable fate. When she is fairly gone, my feet are ignominiously pushed off the stool, and Sir Galahad kneels on it before me.

‘If you ever do marry me, Pearl, I wonder if you will regret it,’ he says, looking up into my face.

‘If I ever do marry you,’—I repeat his words—‘I do not think I shall regret it,’ I reply, lightly, on purpose to tease him.

He looks at me anxiously, and very wistfully, but I keep a serious physiognomy.

‘Do you mean to say that there is any uncertainty in the matter. Pearl, *don’t* play with my feelings.’

‘“*L’homme propose et Dieu dispose*” but as far as human foresight goes, there is no uncertainty,’ I tell him. ‘But the certainty lies in a very far distance,’ I add, for it appears to me that I must expiate some of my infidelity and wrong to Bertrand by a lengthened abstinence from all that my heart desires.

‘*Nous verrons*, as our neighbours across the Channel say,’ and he mocks the little doctor’s voice. I laugh, and so does he.

Two arms slip round my waist, and draw me forward, and my cheek rests against another cheek.

‘Pearl!’

‘Yes!’

‘Do you really love me with all your heart?’

‘With all my heart!’

‘Do you believe that we shall be happy, in spite of Mimi’s evil prognostications?’

‘In spite of everything!’

‘My love!’ he whispers, in a tone that is harmony to me but which would be double-distilled aloes to Mrs Talbot’s ears.

Mrs Haviland’s congratulations are in a different tone from Mrs Talbot’s. It is evening, and Sir Galahad has gone out, leaving us two alone. The brilliant crimson streaks of the sun are gone from the sky, leaving just a flush of orange that blends softly with the blue that is the harbinger of twilight. In the west there is a magnificent array of clouds, that look like castles and beetling rocks, and the chestnuts and oaks toss their green boughs about in the wind, that shakes down a shower of blossoms from the shrubs on to my face, as I lie on the turf at Mrs Haviland’s feet. She sits in a garden-chair, her two hands, plump and dimpled, relinquished to my tender mercies, and I pat them and clasp them to my full bent.

‘Mimi told me to-day that you are going to marry Robert. Is it true, Pearl?’

‘Some day, perhaps, but not for a very, very long time,’ I answer, a conscious face drooping away from her gaze.

‘Not for a very, very long time, Pearl? Why? Robert ought not to be kept out of happiness without a good reason. Pearl, my child, life is not so long but that you should make him as happy as you can while it lasts.’

‘Then my becoming his wife would not vex you as it does Mrs Talbot?’ I ask, eagerly.

‘Mrs Talbot! Why, what can it concern her? I am Robert’s mother!’ she exclaims, proudly, as though her son were really the king that my soul owns him, ‘and I would rather entrust his future to you than to anyone else.’

I jump up from my turfy couch and impetuously fling my arms round her neck, nearly bringing her to an untimely end by choking.

When my violent ebullition of affection is over, and she is free to speak, she says,—

‘And you really love Robert, Pearl—love him with all your heart—with no reservation?’

I stop her questioning with a hearty kiss, but she knows by her mother’s instinct that I *do* love him, honestly and utterly.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE HARVEST MOON.

‘I swear I love you with my virgin fondness,
I live all in you and I die without you.
At your approach my heart beats fast within me,
A pleasing trembling thrills through all my blood
Whene’er you touch me with your melting hand;
But when you kiss—oh, ’tis not to be spoke!’

A BRILLIANT harvest moon, full and round, like a monster amber ball, sails majestically over the gaint pines, tips their boughs with silver, and, through the grey, fretted foliage of the chestnuts, mottles the ground with light and shade. Down near the purling water the long grass nods its head backward and forward slothfully, while upon the eddying ripples the moonbeams dance and play. Pale, holy stars, like clustering gems, hang sparkling in the vaulted sky, shedding a chastened radiance down. The languid air comes laden with the fragrant breath of bud and blossom, rich, drooping foliage casts cool shadows here and there; the night is calm and still, and all the world seems steeped in floods of light, when my guardian and I stand together beneath the arches of the lime-trees.

The mellow beams lend a new tenderness to his eyes and soften the curves of his mouth as he looks down on me. I feel strangely shy, and to hide it I break off a tiny twig with just one white scented bud nestling in a glossy leaf, and, reaching up, I fasten it into his coat.

‘Is it not sweet?’ I ask, when my task is done.

‘Sweet and symbolical,’ he answers, with one of his rare smiles; and I recollect that lime and orange blossoms find an

equal favour in the bouquets that are especially dedicated to Hymen.

We are silent for a moment or two ; then he says to me very gravely,—

‘ Pearl, do you know that it is more than three months ago since we heard of Bertrand de Volnay’s death ? ’

‘ I know it,’ I reply, quietly.

The date is engraved on my mind never more to be erased, come what will, for it was the day on which, in bitter agony of spirit and mad desperation, I clung passionately round my guardian’s neck and sent up the prayer that Heaven answered so soon ! The very remembrance of the scene makes the blood flame in my cheeks, and accelerates the pulse in the wrist that he holds.

‘ Do you still cling to his memory, Pearl, as strongly as you did at first ? ’

‘ I have not forgotten him,’ I murmur, sadly ; and this is true, for in the night watches often and often Bertrand’s face comes back to me so vividly that I start in terror ; and I read reproach in the great dark eyes, that seem to say, ‘ Untrue to me in life, be faithful in death.’ ‘ No, I *cannot* forget him,’ I reiterate, earnestly.

The grasp on my wrist is loosened, and it drops back to my own possession. I look up in surprise at the abruptness of the action.

‘ Surely you cannot grudge poor Bertrand a thought now that he is dead ! When he was alive, I gave him nothing, and you had—’

I stop dead short in the midst of my impetuous speech. Confession *may* be good for the soul, but I feel that I am carrying confession too far, and wearing all my heart on my sleeve.

‘ What had I, Pearl ? ’ he whispers, eagerly.

‘ All ! ’ I flash out frankly and honestly. ‘ And, Mr Haviland, it was very, very wrong of me to give it,’ I add, remorsefully.

‘ Mr Haviland !—am I never to be anything but Mr Haviland to you ? ’ he asks, in a mortified tone.

‘ *Roberto tu che adoro !* ’ I mimic in Miss Græme’s voice.

‘ Say that in any language so long as you *mean* it. Do you never call me *Robert* to yourself, Pearl ? ’

I *have* said it in *soul's* language full many a time, dwelt upon it, and felt that all the music of the spheres was contained in that one name ; but I leave him in ignorance of the fact. My love for him is too deep, too earnest for language—it fills my heart and my brain, and I could find no eloquence sufficient to convey an idea of its height and might, its width and strength.

‘How long has my probation to continue, Pearl?’

I start visibly.

‘Oh! do not speak of that yet!’

‘And why not?’

‘Because I cannot listen to it—the very thought of marriage now, when all my memories are so full of death, is painful—dreadful!’

My guardian fixes his eyes upon my face steadily for a moment.

‘You do not love me! he cries, turning away.

Just where the moonlight falls on his brow, I can see a great shadow creep up, and the muscles of his under lip twitch with pain. The sight is quite enough for me—I should be more than human if I were sufficiently stoical to withstand it and give no sign.

‘Yes, I do,’ I whisper, going up to him and slipping my arm through his.

‘Prove it, then,’ he answers, quickly,—‘prove it by at once casting aside the morbid feelings that stand between me and my happiness—prove it by putting your hand into mine and saying, “Robert, take me, I am ready.” I have waited so long for you, Pearl! I have suffered so much! My heart hungers and thirsts for you, and is not satisfied!’

Oh, my love! my love! it is true what he tells me ; he *has* waited for me long—waited for me through hopelessness and uncertainty, through weary, trying months when, goaded by remorse for my treason to the dead, I hid away my worship of him deep in my breast. He has waited for me through good and evil report, and he has a bounden right to me now!

All my heart goes out to him as these thoughts surge up within me. I disengage my arm from his, and stand before him. Shy no longer, but firm and strong, for the augury of the drifting clouds is fulfilled, and my soul has lost its weak-

ness and insignificance in the strength and nobility of *that other soul*.

I hold out my hands to him, and say, without a falter in my voice,—

‘Take me, Robert. I am ready!’

Kisses—warm, passionate kisses rain down on my brow, and cheeks, and hands.

‘*Child, do you know that I have never touched your lips yet?*’

I know. A hot blush answers for me, but I do not, I *cannot* turn my face away.

Eyes come close, close. A mouth clings to mine.

‘I have *longed* for this, but I waited till these lips were *my very own!*’

The harvest moon grows fuller and brighter as she sails above with her court of glittering satellites. The silver light falls through the interlacing branches, and forms a carpet of diamonds for our feet. All is peaceful and still, not a sound save the soft lilting of the summer wind, the shiver of a leaf on the lime-boughs, or the low twitter of some sleepy bird—not a breath but that of some perfumed flower

‘Did you ever love anyone else but me?’ And my pulse beats fast as I listen for the reply.

‘Never in my life!’

I believe him, and nestle closer in his arms

‘Do you remember one night, more than a year ago, when I said, ‘*Je veux prendre la lune aux dents?*’ but I am too small to reach it.’

‘Yes, little one; and I answered that if you *did* reach it, you would find it was only moonshine after all.’

‘But I *have* reached it!’ And I rest my head against the virgin heart I have conquered, and smile up in my guardian’s face. ‘And it is *not* moonshine!’

‘*My darling!*’

The moon, full-orbed, breaks suddenly through the opening curtains of the clouds. The bright stars hang above us, silent and watchful. The whole air whitens with a boundless tide of silver radiance.

My guardian's eyes look down into mine, and they burn—
burn with an infinite tenderness that finds its response in my
throbbing pulse. His mouth quivers ; his voice trembles.

‘ Will my love suffice you, Pearl ? Will you *never* tire of
me ? ’

For answer my arms creep round his neck, and I whisper
softly in his ear Ruth's fervent prayer,—

‘ Whither thou goest I will go, and where thou lodgest I
will lodge. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God
my God. Where thou diest I will die, and there will I
be buried ! ’

THE END.

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